

Story 1: Hall of Hades – The Girl and the Fox

Chapter 1

That day, I met a beautiful lady—

On the way back home.

I was waiting for the southbound train on the train platform.

She, was on the opposite platform waiting for the northbound train.

At the beginning, I didn't notice her existence.

As I subconsciously shifted my line of sight to the opposite platform, she stood there, appearing suddenly.

Black.

The first thing my eyes registered, was a sea of black.

Black hair, black sailor uniform, black stockings, black shoes, black bag—

Black—a person covered in black. After getting this impression, I immediately had another thought.

Such a beautiful lady, I thought.

The beautiful lady covered in black had very fair skin. I couldn't help but sigh in admiration, staring dumbly at her.

Why aren't the people next to me even looking at her, it was hard to comprehend.

The person in front of me was clearly very beautiful.

Why can't they see that?

Her beauty did not seem to be of this world, and felt like one of a higher being.

This feeling, was similar to meeting the supernatural.

Actually, I can sense these things.

If I told other people about this, I would either be laughed at, or be met with expressions of fear.

However, all of this is true.

Ever since I was young, I could see spirits which no one else can see, and hear things that no one else can hear.

Regarding these things, I am very sensitive to them.

However, the more one insists that they have this ability, the easier one would lose their friends.

During elementary and middle school, a lot of friends left me for this reason.

The only person who was willing to believe me, was a friend I met in middle school— only Yayoi, who is now studying in the same high school as me.

--I believe you.

Yayoi said this to me. Her family runs a shrine, and she would occasionally help out as a shrine maiden.

Maybe, Yayoi is also sensitive to supernatural beings?

Which is why she believed what I said.

But, that beautiful lady dressed entirely in black was definitely not a ghost. Even though she gave the feeling that she isn't of this world, she had a solid body, and was standing on the opposite platform, waiting for the train.

Black, but not nothingness.

Dark, but not a shadow.

The beautiful lady had a very solid presence, and was standing there, alive.

Just then, an announcement played, signalling the arrival of a train arriving on the opposite platform.

I felt that it was a pity. If she boarded the train, I would never be able to see that beautiful face and that beautiful black again.

The ring of the train sounded on the platform.

In order for this beautiful appearance to leave a more lasting impression in my mind, I set my gaze on this beautiful person once more.

However, our eyes met.

Oh no, maybe she found out that I have been secretly staring at her all along, I felt a surge of shame.

But I was unable to look away.

It was as if my body was frozen by her gaze. I was unable to move at all.

Then, she smiled.

---Eh?

I couldn't believe my eyes.

---that beautiful lady, smiled at me...?

After that, the train arrived at the station, and my line of sight was totally blocked by the train.

The sound of the train doors opening was heard.

With my mind a blank, I did not see the beautiful lady enter the train.

When the train started up and left the platform, she was not there anymore.

That smile, what did it mean?

Was I mistaken?

No, that's not it.

That beautiful lady, really smiled at me.

Chapter 2

When I returned home, my mother was on the sofa talking on the phone.

Badly dressed in her home wear, she was lying on the sofa, with her mobile phone pressed to her ear, laughing loudly and ungraciously.

She must be talking to a man again. Mostly likely the boyfriend she's going with now.

The living room was filled with the stench of alcohol.

The coffee table was covered with wine bottles and empty cans.

This home consists of only my mother and me.

When I was very young, my father had already left home.

It is also known as vanishing into thin air.

---That man had another woman, so he ran off.

Mother had said that once, her face full of anger. That face like a female demon, I still remember it clearly, even now.

Having smelt the alcohol fumes in the room, I furrowed my brow. After glancing at my mother on the sofa, I started to walk towards my room.

"Wait a moment."

Mother said. It seems like she was speaking to the person on the other end of the line.

With her mobile phone in hand, she got off the sofa impatiently and moved towards the door separating the living room and the corridor, which would be where I am standing.

"Aren't you going to say 'I'm back?'"

After saying that, she slapped me across the face.

I put a face to my cheek, and looked down.

Then, I looked up and glared at her silently. Mother twisted her lips in an evil manner, and said,

"Your expression is exactly like that man, how disgusting."

Mother tsk-ed, then she lifted her mobile phone and returned to the sofa. As she apologised to that man and continued from where she left off, I entered my room.

After placing my bag on the table, I sat on the bed, and touched the cheek where mother had hit me.

It didn't hurt at all.

But, as long as I remember that this body of mine was touched by that kind of mother, I feel such a sense of disgust that makes me want to throw up.

Filthy humans. Truly filthy...

In order to cleanse the cheek that mother had touched, my mind automatically drifted to the person I saw on the way home.

That beautiful girl, her beautiful smile.

That night, I spoke to Yayoi with my mobile phone.

“When I was going home, I saw an extremely beautiful person.”

After hearing what I said, Yayoi seemed to regret being unable to see that person.

“Is she really that beautiful? I want to take a look too.”

Even though Yayoi studies at the same school as me, we do not belong to the same class. However, we would wait for each other and go home together after school. Yayoi had remedial classes today, which was why I went back alone.

“She was wearing an all black sailor uniform.”

I said.

“A black sailor uniform? Then she must be a student from that school.”

Yayoi said the name of an all girls high school.

The students in that school are all girls from rich families, and a famous school in Kyoto.

“When you meet her next time, why don’t you say hi?”

Yayoi laughed after saying that.

“Eh? No way, I can’t do that ~~”

I replied, laughing as well.

But, I really wanted to see her again, that beautiful girl...

As I was speaking with Yayoi on the phone, I heard my mother’s laughter. It seemed like she was laughing in response to a meaningless television show.

I pushed my phone closer to my ear, trying to block out the noise from the television and my mother’s laughter, then I continued to chat with Yayoi.

After a while, we started to talk about books, Yayoi and I love to read books very much. I would read novels, while Yayoi would also read realistic novels and children’s literature on top of novels.

Books, are an essential part of my life.

Instead of playing around with shallow friends, it would be more meaningful to read an interesting book.

Reading books can cause someone to be more serious and rule abiding.

At the very least, I would not be someone who drinks during the day, dresses badly, flirts with a man who is no good, a failure who hits her own daughter.

I love books, and I admire people who read books.

Suddenly, I thought about that fully black beautiful girl. Does she read books? I really hope that she loves to read too...

“That’s right, that new book is going to be published tomorrow.”

Yayoi said the name of my favourite author.

That author did not write a lot of books, and only publishes one book every two or three years, but I always look forward to his works.

After such a long wait, he has finally published something. Of course, I already knew what the release date is.

I must buy it. But a dark shadow immediately shrouded over my excited feelings.

Am I able to afford it? How much money do I have left in my wallet?

Mother never gave me any allowance, the money she earns from working at a certain store is spent on the minimum amount of rent, food and electricity and water bills. The money that is left after that is spent on men.

So I have no choice but to work to earn my own spending money, or else I wouldn't have enough money to buy the books I like.

However, the money I earn from working is limited. Faced with such a meagre salary, I would struggle for very long before choosing a book.

I want his new book, right now.

But if I don't have any money, I can only wait.

Chapter 3

On the way home the next day, I went to a bookstore in Kawahara town.

Yayoi had to attend a student council meeting, so she couldn't go home with me today as well.

The bookstore is located in a department store.

The copies of the newest book of the author whom Yayoi and I were talking about last night were stacked in the new books area of the literature section.

The book, which took years to write, was split into two volumes. Both were obviously hardcover editions, thick and heavy.

Quite a few people have stopped in front of the new books area, picking up the book to read its cover.

Such a long masterpiece would inevitably cause people to stop and look, but a substantial number of people have picked up a copy of the book and went to the counter to pay.

Should I stretch my hand out? I started to hesitate.

I really want it, I want to read it, but my wallet could not support it.

To buy both volumes, it would cost me 4000 yen.

This month's salary would be given to me in 2 weeks, I will wait till then.

If I spend 4000 yen here, I would not be able to buy bread or lunch at school, or go to the café with Yayoi.

After touching the cover, I reluctantly left the bookstore.

Then taking the escalator down, I left the department store.

As I was about to turn towards the train station, I stopped.

When the thought of having to return to that sort of home crossed my mind, I feel anxious, and my body will become heavy.

As I was hesitating in front of the department store, I suddenly felt an aura from behind me.

---Ah... this is...

A spiritual aura.

I turned back, and gave a soft cry.

Black.

As expected, the first thing I saw was the colour.

That beautiful lady, was standing behind me.

“Ah...uh...”

With the words stuck in my throat, I couldn't say anything at all.

Why is she here?

The beautiful lady stood in front of the helpless me, brushed away the hair on her shoulder, and said,

“You were at the train station yesterday, right? Were you looking at me?”

Why does this person use such old terms? I couldn't help but think that.

(T/N: Using Chinese text to explain, Hagoromo Gitsune refers to herself using 妾身, which is what women in the more ancient era use, instead of 我, both mean 'me' or 'I' though)

However, I quickly changed my way of thinking. For such a beautiful and elegant person, using such terms actually suited her a lot.

But the more appealing thing was her voice.

A clear, beautiful voice.

Her voice is just like her skin, clear and bright.

So immersed was I in her voice, it took a while to respond.

“Uh...I'm sorry...because you were so pretty...I couldn't help but stare...”

I'm really sorry, I said with my head down.

“You don't have to apologise.”

The beautiful lady said, and smiled.

Ahh...I saw her smile again. A flirtatious yet innocent smile.

My chest was suddenly filled with a feeling of happiness.

“Do you have time now?”

The beautiful lady spoke.

“Eh? Time...?”

“Do you want to have some tea with me?”

Some minutes later, I am in a café.

Because my mind is a blank, what places I passed by, or the way to get here, I couldn't remember at all, but this café is very beautiful. Even though it's a bit old, but it felt warm and nostalgic.

The beautiful lady sat across the table from me.

Her hand, holding a teacup, is pretty as well, good enough to be a painting. Beautiful people will always be beautiful no matter what they do.

But...why would she ask me out for tea...?

This question kept circling around in my mind, but I can't find the right time to ask the question at all, I simply felt out of place.

“There's no need to be so reserved, please relax.”

The beautiful lady smiled and said. Her tone was calm and steady, like she had seen through me.

“Okay...” I answered. My voice was soft.

“Do you like to read?”

She asked.

“Eh...?”

“Weren't you really focused on choosing a book earlier?”

“So, you were in the bookstore at that time...?”

The beautiful lady nodded in reply.

She knew I was in the bookstore. Doesn't that mean that she also saw me leaving the bookstore without buying anything?

Once I thought that, I blushed with shame.

Not buying any books because of my allowance, bystanders shouldn't be able to know that right?

But I feel that I would not be able to hide anything from this person.

“Do you like to read?”

She asked again.

“Yes...”

“Is that so? I like to read as well.”

“Really?”

My voice brightened. So she likes to read as well. This made me really happy.

“Reading is an important part of my life...compared to talking to other people, the time I spend reading is more enjoyable...”

After saying that, I quickly added,

“Ah! But talking to you now, I feel very happy too...”

The beautiful lady only gave a warm smile and nodded silently. Her smile was tender, like she could understand my thoughts well.

Afterwards, I started to tell her bits of my life. I do not know the reason, but I feel that I can tell this person everything without holding back. Or more accurately, I want this person to know these things.

I told her, I don't have many friends.

My father left home early, and I am now living with my mother, who relies on alcohol and men.

Even the fact that I can sense spiritual activity...I hesitated at first, but I still said it in the end.

Since I was young, I was able to sense spirits and paranormal activity that other people could not.

I told my friends about this, but they ended up leaving me one by one.

After I finished, I nervously waited for her response.

Are you the same as the others?

Would you leave me as well?

I saw the beautiful lady's lips curve upwards into a small smile.

“Oh... ‘spiritual ability’ isn't it? I believe what you said.”

“...”

I slowly took a deep breath.

“This world has many mysterious things, I believe that such powers exist, and I believe you have that ability.”

Saying that, the beautiful lady smiled again.

I closed my eyes.

Thank goodness. I'm glad I told her...

A feeling of relief spread inside me at that moment.

Now, I finally know how fortunate it feels to have someone accept me.

“Do you still have more time?”

The beautiful lady asked.

In my excited state, I nodded immediately without giving it too much thought.

“Then, you can come to my place.”

“Eh... to your house?”

She nodded in reply,

“I have a lot of books at home, whatever books you like, you can take them home.”

Chapter 4

After leaving the café, we headed towards the train station.

We took the northbound train, and got off the train after a few stations.

During the journey, I felt like I was in a dream. The high spirited feelings I had in the café persists even now.

Currently, I am walking together with the pitch black beautiful lady

We drank tea together, then, we are now going to the beautiful lady's house.

I was filled with a feeling of superiority. It felt like I had become “God's Chosen Person”.

After walking through a quiet residential neighbourhood, and climbing a gentle hill, a huge western mansion suddenly appeared in front of me. The beautiful lady stopped in front of the mansion, expressing that this where she lives.

Seeing this huge mansion, I was momentarily stunned.

Since this beautiful lady is a student of that high class school, I could deduce that she is from a rich family, but I never thought that her house would be this grand.

Walking through the metal gates, and crossing the huge front garden, I was invited into the mansion, which had vines covering its walls.

There were maids welcoming us when we entered the spacious living room, it made me very nervous.

“Send red tea to my room later.”

The beautiful lady gave her instructions to the maid before turning back to me, and mentioned with her eyes to follow.

After walking through the high ceiling corridor, where my footsteps sounded especially loud, I saw a set of stairs at the end.

The stairs that led to the basement.

“Inside is the book archive.”

After saying that, the beautiful lady went downstairs. I followed her silently.

Upon reaching the basement, there was a door which led to the book archive.

The book archive was pitch black. Then there was a ka-cha sound, and the lights came on. The beautiful lady had flipped the light switch on the wall.

A huge, spacious book archive. There were many heavy bookshelves inside, and there were all filled with books. The library in the school is small compared to this.

Even though there was illumination, but the interior was dim. But this gave the place a mysterious feeling, and made me fall in love with it quickly.

My eyes widened in excitement, and slowly walked between the shelves. New books, old books, authors whom I have heard of before, authors whom I did not know, looking at all the different type of books, I felt extremely fortunate.

Books---the smell of paper and ink.

As long as I am here, I am able to forget all the rotten things in the world...

The beautiful person would sometimes stand opposite me, on the other side of the bookshelf, or come up next to me, constantly keeping a distance that is not too far or too near, always within my line of sight.

We talked about our favourite authors.

It's strange, to this person, I am able to open up completely, and tell her about everything.

The one who told me about this author, is a friend called Yayoi, she likes to read as well. I told the beautiful lady, Yayoi's family runs a shrine, and she would occasionally perform the duties of a shrine maiden.

"Oh! A shrine maiden, I see."

The beautiful lady, who had not said anything up till now, suddenly showed an expression of interest.

"You can bring her over next time. Since she likes to read as well, you can bring her to this place."

Hearing the beautiful lady say that, I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous.

I want to be the only one to have this relationship. To have the liking of the queen, just me is enough. These kind of feelings rose in my heart.

But, I quickly blew these thoughts away.

Yayoi is my most important friend.

I want to introduce the beautiful lady who accepted me to my most important friend. Yayoi would definitely be moved by her beauty.

Afterwards, we spent quite some time talking about books.

The beautiful lady told me what books she had been reading recently. She talked about classics and modern books, the range was big.

Ah...this person isn't just have a beautiful appearance, I thought to myself.

Besides her appearance, the beautiful lady is knowledgeable and had good upbringing, she is the perfect woman. Now, I am very sure about that.

Envy or respect, I couldn't completely describe my feelings at that time.

Maybe, adoration was a more accurate word.

Reverence---that's right! That was the word.

I revere her, revere this beautiful person.

I looked at my watch, it's about time I went home.

I can't believe I stayed in the book archive for that long.

I don't want to return to that home, all I want to do is to stay here forever with the beautiful lady...

I really wish for this, but I cannot do it.

As long as I come home a little later than expected, mother would become unhappy, and be rough with me. She does not allow me to loiter around outside, and wants me to stay home.

Mother does not act that way because she wanted me to do things, all she wants to do is tie me at home. She knows I don't like it, yet she insists on it.

It might be because I look like the father who abandoned her, so she is using this method to take revenge on her past spouse.

"You can come over anytime, with your friend."

The beautiful lady said.

Just as I thanked her, and was about to leave, I discovered an important fact.

I haven't asked the beautiful lady's name, and I haven't even told her my name.

I'm too careless, I opened my mouth and asked timidly,

"Um! May I know what your name is?"

It must be a pretty name. I thought as I waited for her answer.

"My name?"

The beautiful lady said to herself, before she finally said,

"I don't mind telling you, but why don't we address each other with nicknames?"

"Nicknames...?"

"Just treat it as a type of entertainment. For me...just call me 'Kitsune-sama'."

"Kitsune-sama..."

I repeated to myself. Kitsune-sama nodded happily.

"Then how should I address you?"

Kitsune-sama asked. I lowered my head.

"I..."

Nickname...what should I use? After thinking a long time, I couldn't come up with one.

I don't want to come up with a weird name, and make Kitsune-sama unhappy.

After hesitating a long time, I finally said the name of the main character of my favourite novel, and asked her to call me by that name.

Kitsune-sama gave a smile, and nodded.

"Alright, I will call you by that in the future."

Chapter 5

The next day after school, I immediately invited Yayoi to Kitsune-sama's house.

Seeing the huge mansion, Yayoi was very shocked. Then, when she saw the even more shockingly beautiful Kitsune-sama, her eyes widened even more.

"Welcome."

Kitsune-sama said, smiling. "Ye...yeah." Yayoi said unnaturally while nodding in reply.

Yayoi's appearance and thinking were more mature than mine. But in front of Kitsune-sama, even she had her moments of not knowing what to do.

However, that cannot be helped. Kitsune-sama's appearance and wisdom are perfect. Anyone who sees her for the first time would be stunned.

"Let's talk a bit before going to the book archive."

After saying that, Kitsune-sama turned and walked forward, her hair swaying from the movement.

Yayoi and I followed quietly behind.

After climbing up the wide stairs, we walked along the corridor for a short while.

"The scenery from here is especially beautiful."

Kitsune-sama said, gesturing for Yayoi and me to come onto the balcony.

After passing through the floor length black curtains, and standing on the balcony, I could see the streets of Kyoto.

Under the gray skies, where the dense forest ends, the buildings of the city centre of Kyoto could be seen.

Talking about the dark skies, the weather has been rather gloomy lately.

However, compared to clear skies all around, the gray and gloomy weather would be more suitable for Kitsune-sama's house.

We sat facing each other on opposite sides of the table, drinking the red tea which the maid brought.

It's like I'm dreaming, I thought.

Being able to see such beautiful scenery in such a beautiful mansion, and talking with a pretty Kitsune-sama while drinking tea, this situation would not be something I would be able to envision a few days ago.

My daily life was living in an untidy apartment filled with the smell of alcohol, hiding in my room and covering my ears when I hear my mother's gasps and panting sounds, having to face my mother's violence, having no choice but to use literature as a way to run from reality...the happy times I am experiencing right now, is a gift given to me by Kitsune-sama.

Yayoi must be very moved as well. I glanced towards my friend sitting next to me.

However, Yayoi's expression was very stiff, and she barely drank any of her red tea.

Yayoi?

This is a rare chance to talk to Kitsune-sama, why are you making that kind of expression?

Why can't you be a little happier?

Seeing Yayoi's expression, I felt a little unhappy. Maybe she's still a little nervous, I used this reason to comfort myself.

On the balcony, Kitsune-sama talked about many things.

Even though the contents are miscellaneous things about Kitsune-sama's life, I listened attentively, afraid that I would miss one sentence.

Kitsune-sama said, she doesn't wear anything when she goes to sleep at night. (Her sleeping form must be just like an angel?)

Kitsune-sama said, her second favourite food is fried tofu. (As for her favourite food, Kitsune-sama only gave a teasing evil smile, and did not reveal it. However, the childish side of Kitsune-sama is attractive as well.)

Kitsune-sama said, she will halt her studies soon. (Kitsune-sama did not reveal why, but I believe she has her circumstances.)

When the conversation came to an end, Kitsune-sama suddenly said to Yayoi,

"What I have talked about, is it boring?"

Yayoi let out an "Eh", and her shoulders trembled a bit.

"When I was talking, you seemed restless, do you have something urgent to do?"

"No! There's nothing..."

Yayoi said and lowered her head when she finished.

I'm sorry, Kitsune-sama. Yayoi is too nervous.

Kitsune-sama is too attractive, and has such good upbringing, that's why Yayoi is cowering so much.

I wanted to interrupt and help Yayoi explain.

But Kitsune-sama opened her mouth first, and asked Yayoi,

"Which shrine do you live in?"

Yayoi hesitated at first, but eventually said the name of the shrine.

I've been to that shrine a few times. Even though it's not a famous shrine, it has a long history.

Kitsune-sama seems to know about the shrine as well.

"Oh! It's that shrine. It's pretty large."

She said.

"The fact that we met is also fate, so please take care of me in the future. After all, there has always been a connection between shrines and foxes."

Kitsune-sama smiled lightly after saying that, and drank some red tea.

At that moment, Yayoi only nodded her head in silence.

"Okay, it's about time to go to the book archive in the basement. You like to read as well, right?"

Just as Kitsune-sama finished her sentence, and stood up from her chair---

"I'm sorry...I..."

Yayoi suddenly stood up from her chair.

"Just now I said I had nothing on...but I actually do. So...I'm going back..."

"Yayoi?"

I stood up quickly as well.

Yayoi never mentioned that she had anything on. To phrase it better, it's because I knew she had free time that I brought her to this place."

"I'm sorry, I suddenly remembered that I have something to do."

Yayoi apologized again, before she quickly left the balcony, re-entering the house.

"Wait! Yayoi!"

Should I chase after Yayoi? Or should I stay here? At that moment, I hesitated, not knowing what to do. Then---

"Go back with her. Come over again when it's more convenient. I won't mind at all."

Kitsune-sama said considerately.

"I'm sorry, Kitsune-sama."

After I bowed my head in apology, I ran to catch up with Yayoi.

Yayoi seemed frantic. After passing through the garden, and almost reaching the gate, I finally caught up with Yayoi after much effort.

"Yayoi, what's wrong?"

I moved to her side and asked, but Yayoi did not reply.

After walking through the gate, and walking down the slope, Yayoi finally spoke,

"I'm sorry, you specially invited me here, but I left so suddenly..."

Yayoi said.

"It's fine, but what's bothering you? Are you unwell?"

Hearing my question, Yayoi's face darkened, and looked at the mansion on the hill.

"I don't know why, but I feel that it's terrifying..."

She mumbled with a small voice.

"Terrifying...?"

"That person..."

"Kitsune-sama?"

"Yes! She is beautiful, but...I can't describe it well, but in short, her eyes are scary..."

“Eyes?”

“Yes! I feel that she is not treating me as a friend, but *something else*...maybe I’m thinking too much...”

“Maybe it’s because Kitsune-sama wants to forge a closer relationship with you, that’s why you got that feeling...”

In response to my explanation, Yayoi just shook her head. She seemed reluctant to be more specific about what she said.

“I’m really sorry.”

Yayoi apologized again, and continued walking without waiting for me.

Seeing her current state, I didn’t feel like chasing after her at all, and stayed where I was by myself.

Why was Yayoi this afraid, I couldn’t understand at all.

After I watched Yayoi’s back becoming smaller and smaller as she walked on, I turned towards the slope behind me.

Kitsune-sama was currently standing on the balcony. Even though it was a small figure, but I could still see her.

From here, I couldn’t see the exact expression on her face. But the way she placed her left hand at her waist, seemed just like a queen who ruled the world.

She really is beautiful, I couldn’t help but sigh. There wasn’t any terror in my heart at all.

Chapter 6

When I returned home from Kitsune-sama’s house, my mother and that man were in the living room.

Those two people were getting intimate on the couch. Seeing me enter, the man immediately withdrew the arm that was around my mother’s shoulders.

Actually, they can continue being intimate. I stared at them coldly, and threw out a sentence,

“I’m back.”

Then I turned my head, planning to enter my room.

“Wait.”

My mother stopped me.

Filthy. Don’t talk to me. Even though I thought that, but I still turned my head. If I do not react, I’ll just get into trouble.

My mother walked up to me and stretched out her arm, her palm open.

“Hey! Lend me some money?”

“...”

I couldn’t help but glare at my mother angrily.

That face and mouth was smiling charmingly, and smelled of alcohol.

“I know that you’re working, hey, lend me some money!”

“...”

An indescribable rage enveloped my body at that moment.

What right do you have to ask me for money? This is something I worked hard for, why would I give it to trash like you?

But, the anger did not last very long.

If I do not give her money, that woman would probably use her fists on me. Throwing things around, causing destruction, and it would be me who would clean up in the end.

I sighed, took my wallet out from my bag, and pulled out a note. At that same time, I thought that I wouldn't be able to buy anything this month.

My mother reached out her hand, whose nail polish was peeling off, and snatched the money away.

"I'll return it to you when I remember."

After saying that, my mother returned back to the man on the sofa.

The man on the sofa was around 30 years old, with blonde hair that didn't look clean. He was currently smiling at me like he had bad intentions.

Go die!

I shouted in my heart without hesitation.

Returning to my room, I closed the door. As the door was about to close, I heard my mother's voice.

The brat is more detestful the more I look at her, if I knew, I wouldn't have given birth to her---

Chapter 7

Yayoi and I drifted apart.

After returning from Kitsune-sama's place, both of us will feel awkward around each other if we meet in school, and we are no longer as close as before.

Seeing a gap open up between me and my friend, I feel very sad about it.

If this continues, the relationship between us will be done for. I decided to have a good talk with her.

During lunch break, I secretly went to Yayoi's class to see if she was around.

Today, I want to ask her to go home with me.

However, Yayoi wasn't in the class, her classmates said that she took the day off.

Was she not feeling well?

"Yayoi, how is your health? You must get well soon~~let's go out and play again soon!"

I sent her a message.

After school, I arrived at Kitsune-sama's house.

When my mental state has been strained to its limit by my despicable mother, I can only rely on the world of words and my conversations with Yayoi to heal my soul.

Currently, possibly because I am not that close to Yayoi anymore, the me who needed comfort is relying on Kitsune-sama again.

Of course, Yayoi is important to me as well.

However, I want to see Kitsune-sama as well.

Seeing that beautiful face, hearing that beautiful voice, giving my body and soul to her...

Barely holding down my emotions, I walked towards the mansion on the hill.

Passing through the gates and the spacious garden, I was about to enter the porch when...

At that moment, in the garden, which was normally empty, I could see a person.

It was a little girl. I didn't know if she was part of this household, and she was holding something in her hands.

When I moved for a closer look, I breathed in sharply.

The thing in the girl's hand was a skull.

That wasn't the only shocking thing. There was a snake slithering across the skull. The snake's body passed through the left and right eye sockets of the skull and curled around the girl, with its head on the girl's shoulder, its tongue flicking in and out.

The girl looked like she is still in elementary school, and is someone from the lower grades. Her hair was tied up high, and she was wearing a bright kimono.

"Are you a friend of Onee-sama?"

The girl spoke.

Onee-sama? Is she referring to Kitsune-sama?

"Are you the younger sister of Kitsune-sama?"

I asked. But the girl only smiled in a flirtatious manner and did not answer my question.

"Isn't that snake dangerous? Aren't you afraid?"

Still, she did not answer me.

Then, with a smile on her face, she walked past me and entered the house.

Marutake, Ebisuni, Oshioike, Anesan, Rokkaku, Takonishiki... she sang as she walked.

As long as one lived in Kyoto, they would know this song made up of street names.

Marutamachi Street, Takeyamachi Street, Ebisugawa Street, Nijo Street, Oshikoji Street, Oike Street...this song took the first character of every street, lining them up from north to south.

Even though the girl looked cute, she felt somewhat terrifying.

And once I think about it more closely, the girl's kimono was folded right over left, the way dead people wear it.

Following that girl into the house, doing that felt scary, but my feelings of wanting to see Kitsune-sama helped me overcome that fear.

I entered the hall.

Under the guidance of the maid, I ended up at the balcony from the previous time.

Kitsune-sama was already there, drinking red tea.

The girl who has the skull isn't there. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I wanted to ask Kitsune-sama who the girl was, but I dismissed that notion.

Seeing Kitsune-sama's beautiful face, those questions became insignificant at that moment, I just wanted to tell Kitsune-sama about my plight as soon as possible.

Kitsune-sama and I sat facing each other, and I started talking about myself.

I didn't talk about happy things like books, but something that would cause my spirits to sink once I talk about it, yet at the same time, I needed to talk about it to vent my feelings, my unfortunate situation. Being hit by my mother, having my money taken, my life which is devoid of hope.

"She said that if she knew earlier, she wouldn't have given birth to me..."

When I came back to my senses, I realized I was crying.

It is painful living with that kind of mother, if I knew that my mother was that sort of person, I wouldn't have wanted to be born too.

That home, is a living hell...

After seeing me cry while revealing my deepest thoughts, Kitsune-sama comforted me with a calm voice,

"...This world is filled with dirty things, your mother is one of them. She is not qualified to be a mother..."

But, I am different--- Kitsune-sama continued to say.

---Eh?

I raised my head.

And saw Kitsune-sama stroking her belly, and continuing,

"If I became a mother, I would love and protect my flesh and blood wholeheartedly, without distancing or hating him..."

It was strange. Kitsune-sama, who said these things, it felt like she already had a child inside her.

Having talked about my troubles with Kitsune-sama, I calmed down a lot.

After thanking Kitsune-sama, I left the mansion.

Today, Kyoto is still cloudy.

Walking down the slope, I flipped open my phone.

I thought, maybe Yayoi had answered my message.

But there were no messages or missed calls in my phone.

Chapter 8

The next morning, I knew about Yayoi's death only after I watched the news.

And Yayoi wasn't the only one who died, her whole family was murdered.

It was said that Yayoi did not have any obvious wounds on her body.

According to the autopsy results, *part of the organs in Yayoi's body had disappeared.*

The bodies of her family were chopped into pieces.

Kyoto's bloody murder case that wiped out a whole family caused a huge wave in the nation.

The media flocked in droves to Yayoi's shrine, or to our school.

After school, I was also questioned by reporters with a microphone at the gates. I didn't answer any questions, and fled the scene.

I didn't want to answer. I didn't know how to answer properly even if I wanted to.

This incident was a big blow to me. I was so overcome by sadness, that I thought I was going to go mad.

I locked myself in my room and cried continuously.

Yayoi, why did you die?

Yayoi, I wanted to talk more with you.

Yayoi, I wanted to patch up with you.

Yayoi...

Yayoi...

Even though I have encountered something so saddening, my mother didn't change at all.

I am crying with great sadness in my heart, yet my mother bought the man from last time into the house, drinking alcohol from daytime, only caring about getting passionate with one another.

On my bed, I covered myself with my blanket, trying to block out the sounds from outside.

But my mother's brainless voice still transmitted into the room, that lousy woman said to me inside the room,

"I heard that your friend from the shrine was killed? You must know some things that the media doesn't, right? Tell me if you know something, it can be sold for a good price."

The man's laughter was heard from inside the room after that.

I almost threw up. Why are both of you still alive, while Yayoi and her family had to die?

Filthy! Filthy! Filthy! Filthy---

Both of you are filthy!

Kitsune-sama...

Habouring sadness and hatred, I tried my best to cry silently.

Maybe because I was tired from crying, I fell asleep without realizing it.

When I woke up, I felt someone next to my feet. The lights in my room weren't on, and it was pitch black, but I know there is someone in my room.

"Who is it...?"

Once I said that in a hoarse voice, someone jumped on top of me.

I knew very quickly who that person was. It was that man, the man that mother bought was pressing on top of me. The man's voice, which smelled of alcohol and cigarettes, reached my ears.

"Mother is asleep after getting drunk...let's have some fun!"

My mind went blank from fear.

"Ah---!"

The man used his hand to cover my screaming mouth, and immediately, I couldn't breathe.

I struggled with all my strength to try and escape, but I couldn't go against that man's strength, and was pressed onto the bed.

The man's hand touched my thigh.

I shook my head and struggled, moving my mouth.

Suddenly, my chance came---

I bit down hard on the hand covering my mouth, slamming against his body as he cried in pain, and escaped the bed.

"Hey! Bitch!"

The man's angry shouts came from behind me, so I could only run outside in my socks.

Without even putting on my shoes, I ran with all my strength down the streets, leaving that home being the only thing on my mind. I didn't even check if that man is catching up or not, I just ran forward.

I ran and stopped, stopped and ran, these repeating actions caused me to sweat profusely. My face was also streaked with tears. It felt like my body is going to disappear if I continued like this.

I would like to disappear, like to leave this world. I thought this as I ran.

When I ran until I could not breathe anymore, I finally stopped.

This place was the foot of a gentle slope.

My surroundings were dark. I've seen this scenery before.

The black mansion at the top of the slope, enveloped in darkness.

It looks like that I sub-consciously made my way of Kitsune-sama's house.

I dragged my unsteady body into the mansion.

The door which looked like it was locked tightly opened with a light push, and the porch door wasn't locked either.

I walked into the living room and saw Kitsune-sama standing there.

Kitsune-sama didn't look shocked at my appearance at all, as if she already knew that I would come.

She hugged my body, covered in sweat and tears, stroking my head gently.

"Look at what state you're in, you poor thing. Come, tell me what happened..."

Hearing this, I momentarily relaxed, but I couldn't help but cry, then I said, sniffing the whole time,

"That man...mother's boyfriend, to me..."

In Kitsune-sama's embrace, I talked about how I almost got violated.

I couldn't return to that home anymore. I don't want to go back, that home is Hell, I absolutely do not want to...

Kitsune-sama said while stroking my head,

"Is that so? In that case, come and live in my house then."

"Eh..."

I looked at Kitsune-sama's face, doubtful.

Kitsune-sama only smiled and nodded.

"I am fine with it, or is it because, you don't like it here?"

"No...how can I dislike this place..."

Being able to live with Kitsune-sama in this house, there is nothing that could be more perfect.

I looked at Kitsune-sama, my eyes wet with tears, and nodded determinedly.

"Kitsune-sama, let me be a part of this household."

Chapter 9

"Then, from tonight onwards, you are part of this family."

Kitsune-sama said.

I was touched and relieved, and couldn't speak due to my strong emotions.

"You don't have to worry about food and clothes. But do you have something at home that you must take with you?"

Once Kitsune-sama asked, the gears in my mind started to turn.

Something I must take...

It was true, I didn't take anything with me when I left my house, I ran out without even wearing my shoes.

Something I left at home, something that I must have by my side---I immediately thought of my mobile phone.

The messages that Yayoi sent to me were in my phone, I must take my phone with me.

And the notebook where I write down my thoughts after reading a book was at home too. Besides my opinions, my deepest feelings about my everyday life were also inside. If possible, I would like to take that away, together with my phone.

"I want to take back my mobile phone, and my notebook..."

After I said that, Kitsune-sama nodded.

“Sure! Let’s go and get them now.”

“Eh...now?”

Kitsune-sama nodded again.

That man must still be at home, will it really be okay?

Seeing me return after running away from home, I’m not sure how that man’s reaction will react.

He must be very angry! And if mother hasn’t woken up yet, he’ll just lay his hands on me again.

No! Now with Kitsune-sama there, after seeing such an extremely beautiful person like Kitsune-sama, he will become more beastly.

If the situation became like that, Kitsune-sama will be in danger.

“Kitsune-sama, that man should still be in the house...”

I pointed out timidly, but Kitsune-sama only shook her head lightly, with her beautiful long hair swaying with the movement.

“Do not worry, no one would be able to touch me.”

Let’s go! Kitsune-sama said and put on her shoes quickly.

Kitsune-sama summoned a maid, and asked her to prepare a pair of shoes that would fit me, so I wore the shoes that the maid prepared.

The train was still available now, so Kitsune-sama and I headed towards the train station.

As the whole process was going too smoothly, I started to have doubts.

Is this going to be okay? The person waiting for us at home, was a despicable man who tried to use force to satisfy his own desires.

Even though he led an unhealthy life of smoke and alcohol, but he is still a man. Just thinking about his brute strength terrorizes me.

Why is Kitsune-sama so sure that that man would not use violence to make us listen to him?

But once I saw Kitsune-sama, her body swaying with the train’s movements, with a smile on her face, I suddenly felt that everything might be solved.

Maybe Kitsune-sama, who looked too beautiful and too perfect, had some ability that is beyond the comprehension of humans.

Kitsune-sama and I arrived at the door of my apartment.

Seeing me freeze at the front door, Kitsune-sama urged,

“Don’t be afraid, we’ll leave once we’re done with our business.”

As long as Kitsune-sama is around, everything will be alright. After steeling myself, I opened the front door.

There was a straight corridor beyond the porch, and at the other end of it was the door to the living room.

Through the open door, I could see a man and a woman, it was mother and that man.

They seem to be quarreling.

“You actually laid your hands on that girl, has your brain been eaten by a pig!”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“You obviously tried to ambush her while I was asleep, and you still want to lie to me! You’re shameless!”

“How many times do I have to tell you this? I told you I didn’t do anything, that’s it!”

The two angrily yelling voices were so sharp that I wanted to cover my ears. When I remembered that the blood of one of them flows in my body, I felt extremely disgusted.

At that moment, Kitsune-sama did something.

She didn’t even take off her shoes, and walked into the living room.

“Kitsune-sama...?”

I caught up hurriedly.

Even though I said it was a corridor, but it actually spans quite a short distance, we reached the living room quickly.

Seeing me and Kitsune-sama enter, mother stopped shouting.

In reaction to me bringing a pretty lady home, the expressions of both their faces froze.

But, their faces started to become expressive again.

Mother said to me,

“You seduced my man, trying to snatch him away, right? How can I have a shameless daughter!”

The man said to me,

“We didn’t even do anything, right? Nothing was done, nothing at all!”

Mother said to me,

“I really can’t let my guard down around a woman like you!”

But the man said to me,

“Hey! Who is this lady? She looks great.”

Mother said to that man,

“That girl is only a kid! What nonsense are you sprouting!”

The man said to Kitsune-sama,

“Hey! What high school do you study at?”

Mother said a few sentences to that man.

That man replied a few sentences to my mother.

The lowly man and woman, continued talking without stopping.

I closed my eyes tightly.

Mother's voice, that man's voice. The filthy feeling I felt increased. Mother's voice.....that man's voice.....

I hate all of this...

Disgust, hatred, deep pain---Kitsune-sama.....

Suddenly---my surroundings went quiet.

Then, a sound entered my ears.

Pacha, pacha, pacha, don, don, don.

It sounded like a vegetable had fallen and rolled on the ground.

I opened my eyes.

The room had changed totally.

Red.

The first thing my eyes registered, was a sea of red.

The walls and ceiling have been dyed red. The strange thing is, mother and that man had disappeared.

I was wondering how those two people suddenly disappeared, but I found them quickly.

They were on the floor, or more accurately, what used to belong their bodies were scattered on the ground. Head, arm, both legs...both of them have turned into various body parts, and have been carelessly thrown on the ground by someone.

Ahh...

They're dead.

I was actually strangely calm, and concluded what I saw in front of me.

"This is your wish."

Just then, I heard a voice. It was Kitsune-sama's attractive voice.

"I helped you fulfill your wish."

Kitsune-sama, who said this, had many red spots on her face, it was spattered blood.

Ah.....Kitsune-sama, how can this be.

Such dirty blood, has actually dirtied Kitsune-sama's beautiful face.....

Then, I saw an animal's tail coming out from behind Kitsune-sama's skirt.

A few smooth and beautiful huge tails.

The tails were swaying lightly, like they had a life of their own.

Ah, beautiful Kitsune-sama, even her tails are beautiful.

Because of me, Kitsune-sama used her tails to get rid of those two lowly, filthy beings.

Thank you, Kitsune-sama...

“-----”

Kitsune-sama’s pink lips moved, even though I could not hear what she said clearly, but I grasped the meaning.

For unknown reasons, I knew she was calling me.

Yes! Kitsune-sama...I mumbled in reply, and stepped closer to her.

“-----”

Kitsune-sama said a few more sentences. I still couldn’t hear her well, but mysteriously, I understood the meaning.

Yes! Kitsune-sama...I’m willing to offer my lips to you...

Being able to kiss Kitsune-sama, there is nothing else more blessed in this world.

Kitsune-sama stretched out her thin and fair fingers, placing them on my shoulder.

Her delicate lips were slowly closing in on mine.

I closed my eyes lightly.

I felt my lips being covered.

At this moment, I felt like I’ve gone to Heaven---

*

After sucking away the girl’s liver, Hagoromo Gitsune left the apartment.

When she reached outside, a rough laughter was heard from an unknown source.

“Fufufu...”

Hagoromo Gitsune placed both hands on her hips.

“Minagoroshi Jizou, it’s you...”

“Hagoromo Gitsune-sama, it looks like you’ve had dinner....no, it should be supper.”

Minagoroshi Jizou said as he appeared out from the darkness at the end of the road, his head was unusually swollen, and he had a large eye on his head, a very deformed old man.

“Even though the taste isn’t much, I still managed to stomach it.”

“The shrine girl you had last time should be more delicious right? Fufufu...”

Hagoromo Gitsune hmphed.

“How the liver tastes depends on the abilities of each person. Tonight’s liver was very crude, it looks like it’s not enough just having spiritual power, the taste wasn’t deep enough.”

“What you said is correct...but it seemed like you spent quite some time on this meal. Since you wanted to eat anyway, why didn't you just make your move the first time you met her?”

“It's just some entertainment. I wanted to try out this 'friendship game'. Even though the taste can be described as 'bad', but it was a good way to pass time.”

After saying that, Hagoromo Gitsune flicked her hair, and started to walk away.

A game that one has grown tired of will not be missed.

The beautiful youkai fox, starts to make her way to her next entertainment.

That would be unsealing the eight seals in Kyoto, it was about time to start the preparations.

Thinking that the seals will soon be conquered, Hagoromo Gitsune couldn't help but smile.

She subconsciously touched her stomach.

Slowly, gently, loving the child inside her---

END

Story 2 - Youkai Grocery Trip with Child in Tow

Chapter 1

“Hey! I’m going out for a walk.”

The Supreme Commander shouted in the direction of the kitchen. He was carrying a ten month old Rihan in his arms.

Looking at the garden from the corridor, the weather seemed very good that day. It would be such a pity to stay in the mansion, so the Supreme Commander decided to take a stroll.

Hearing the Supreme Commander’s voice, Youhime looked out from the kitchen. Her drooping long sleeves were tied behind her back with a rope, and she wore an apron, giving off an orderly feeling, it seems like she was preparing to cook. Even though Youhime is the Supreme Commander’s wife, but it’s not like she was able to avoid doing any household chores. She felt she needed to set an example, and perform duties as expected from a wife, so as to avoid having others saying bad things behind her back.

Youhime, who had looked out, smiled when she saw the Supreme Commander carrying Rihan securely. Yes! That’s the right way. Youhime’s face was filled with a smile of affirmation.

In the past, he would always drape Rihan over his shoulder like he was carrying a shoulder pole. Now he finally understood how to carry a child, Youhime felt very reassured.

“Where is Ayakashi-sama planning to go?”

Youhime asked.

“I’m not planning to go anywhere in particular, I’ll just go to wherever I feel like.”

“If Ayakashi-sama is going to the city streets, can you help me buy something? Please go to the vegetable and fruit shop and buy some radish.”

Just as she was about to cook, Youhime realised that there wasn’t enough radish.

The mansion’s vegetables, fish and rice are all purchased from various places.

Normally, the youkai in the mountains and rivers would bring back what they had gathered. Of course, they would occasionally buy things from the city streets.

“Radish, right? Okay, I got it.”

The Supreme Commander nodded readily. He initially planned to stroll through the city’s shops anyway.

Even though it was just buying something, but once he accepted someone’s request, a simple walk will start to have a purpose, which actually felt quite nice.

“Just radish is enough?”

“Yes!”

Youhime nodded, but almost immediately, another voice was heard.

“Ah! While you’re there, get some red carrots, burdock, cucumbers, and yam as well.”

The one who walked out of the kitchen after saying all that is the snow lady Setsura. Her clothes were also tied back with a rope, and she wore an apron, it looks like she is also helping in the kitchen.

“How many things do you want me to buy?”

The Supreme Commander rolled his eyes at her, but Setsura ignored it completely.

“It’s on the way, so there’s no problem. It’s not as if I asked you to help me prepare the ingredients.”

“Even if you asked me, I wouldn’t do it!”

“Setsura, do we need that much?”

Hearing Youhime’s question, Setsura turned around and answered,

“Of course we do. It’s the General Meeting tomorrow, and a lot of the members would come, so it’s best that we are well prepared.”

“Oh yes! If we find out that we don’t have enough ingredients tomorrow, it would be troubling.”

“That’s right! I never expected that those people would actually eat vegetables, how surprising.”

“Really. But vegetables are good for the body, so it’s a good thing.”

Looking at the two women, who were talking to each other while nodding in response to each other’s words, the Supreme Commander scratched his head impatiently.

“Okay! I’ll buy them, that’s all right, the ones that were mentioned just now?”

“Then, Ayakashi-sama, please buy some lotus roots as well.”

Youhime added, the aura she was giving off felt more and more like a housewife.

“Radish, red carrots, burdock and cucumbers...and...uh...”

“There’s still yam and lotus roots.”

“Oi oi! With so much stuff, I won’t be able to carry it back by myself, and I’m also taking Rihan along.”

The Supreme Commander rocked Rihan gently as he finished his sentence, Rihan gave a cry of happiness.

“Won’t you be carrying the bamboo basket?”

“The bamboo basket? I don’t think that can fit everything.”

T/N: The bamboo basket they are referring to is the large one that can be carried on the back.

Setsura’s suggestion caused the Supreme Commander to frown.

“Supreme Commander, in that case, why don’t you use this?”

Karasu Tengu’s voice could be heard from the kitchen’s back door.

Turning around, something that looked like a wooden box could be seen on the ground, Karasu Tengu was standing on it.

“Karasu Tengu, every time I see you, it seems like your body has shrunk by one size.”

“Uh! My body’s size doesn’t matter at all. Let’s not talk about that anymore, please take a look at this.”

Karasu Tengu pointed towards the box at his feet once more.

“What is this?”

“Let’s just call it a box cart. I thought that Supreme Commander will be asked to run errands one day, so I prepared this.”

“Box cart?”

The Supreme Commander raised an eyebrow, Rihan, who could not have understood the meaning of it, echoed with an “Ah!”

After taking a closer look, he understood. For this thing, there is no other term that would be more fitting than ‘Box cart’.

There were wheels on both sides of the wooden box, and a handle was attached to it at a suitable height. As long as he grabbed the handle, he would be able to push or pull it to make it move forward.

“As long as you have this box cart, Supreme Commander would be able to go out with Rihan, and buy many things at the same time.”

Finishing his explanation, Karasu Tengu puffed out his chest happily.

“I see. When I go there, it’s empty and I can let Rihan sit inside, and when I return, I can carry him.”

“Exactly, Supreme Commander.”

Just as Karasu Tengu nodded in reply, Youhime asked,

“Ayakashi-sama...putting Rihan in such a hard box, wouldn’t it be too dangerous?”

“Nonono, Youhime-san.”

Karasu Tengu quickly interrupted to reassure her. Then, flapping his wings, he started to explain,

“My lady does not have to worry. Please look at its interior, the bottom is lined with cushions and padding, Rihan-sama will not feel any pain if he lies down in it. If the amount of padding is adjusted, the height can be changed as well.”

Karasu Tengu continued to explain enthusiastically,

“Also... Rihan-sama just learnt how to *stand up*, so I installed some bars which young master can grab if he wants to stand up, like this.”

“Even though your body is tiny, your craftsmanship is quite good.”

Setsura commented sarcastically in a soft voice.

“Can’t you keep your thoughts to yourself?”

Karasu Tengu glared at her, and turned towards the Supreme Commander once more.

“That’s about it. Supreme Commander, do you think this box cart is suited for your needs?”

“It’s not bad! Okay! Let me try it!”

Seeing that the Supreme Commander wanted to use the box cart without asking for her opinion, Youhime could help but cry out “Ayakashi-sama”, her face filled with worry.

“Don’t worry, everything would be fine.”

The Supreme Commander gave a firm smile so his wife could relax.

"I would pay extra attention when Rihan is sleeping or standing up, I won't let him get into any danger, don't worry. I don't want to see you blow your top over Rihan again."

"Why do you have to put it that way..."

Youhime puffed up her cheeks, but that face was still as cute as before.

"The volcano would probably not explode again, no matter how dumb this guy is, he would learn sooner or later."

The one who said such a scathing comment without hesitation was Setsura.

"Then, please look after Rihan, Ayakashi-sama."

In response to Youhime's repeated reminders, the Supreme Commander nodded surely with a "Yeah", and went on his way.

Chapter 2

Stall owners promoting their products while carrying weighing scales, the shouts of customers calling for the stall owners, the lively opening acts of street performers...the various sounds merged together inject a boundless amount of energy into Edo.

The shops lining the street are filled with various products on display, from food to clothes, a visual display of the high prosperity of Edo.

Under the clear skies, the Supreme Commander, with both hands on the cart, pushed it leisurely amongst the lively streets of Edo.

Rihan, on the other hand, was sitting securely in the box cart. Even though a layer of padding had been added, but the box cart still shook with a kacha kacha sound. But Rihan didn't seem to mind it at all, he just looked up happily at the sky above the cart.

Occasionally looking at his son's expression, the Supreme Commander always smiled lightly each time.

His ten month old son is going to be one year old in 2 months. In a blink of an eye, it has been almost one year since Rihan was born. Thinking about this, it is really amazing how quickly time flies.

In addition, his perception of time has also changed from before.

Youkai normally live very long lives. Even though it differs from species to species, their lifespan is always much longer than humans.

One, two hundred years have passed, from a youkai's point of view, there is no need to reflect on this time at all when they think back, they would rather think about the world a thousand years from now. Time is that insignificant to youkai.

However, to the Supreme Commander, he can no longer view time in this manner.

The incident which changed his viewpoint is the battle with that Fox.

He sees the peaceful and prosperous streets of Edo, yet in his mind, the scenes of the battle with Hagoromo Gitsune are shown.

Even though he won the battle at the Tower Keep of Osaka Castle, but the Supreme Commander was pierced in the chest by the tails of the youkai fox and got his liver stolen. Losing his liver meant losing part of his life span.

With his life span shortened greatly, the thousand year lifespan no longer belonged to him.

Then how about 500 years later? Will I still be alive then? Even if I'm still alive, my body would not be like before, I cannot imagine that it would be as sturdy as it is now.

But with regards to his lifespan, the Supreme Commander did not see it as something to be depressed over.

One's lifespan would always go to zero one day, it's the same for youkai and humans.

The fortunate thing is that the Supreme Commander had things he treasures. Not just the company of Youhime, but also his healthy son Rihan. These two people are his most precious things.

As to when he should allow Rihan to inherit the Nura clan he created, he has not decided. It might be one hundred years later, it might be earlier. He might not even have to decide at all, when the time is right, the process will occur naturally.

The Second Supreme Commander, huh... he thought as he watched his own son sitting in the box cart.

I will leave the world one day, but Rihan, the Nura Clan still has you.

Rihan, you must live well. Freely and leisurely. Then bring a bright and happy wind to the Nura Clan, just like the weather today.

In the box cart, Rihan seemed to have felt his father's wishes, and suddenly turned to look at the Supreme Commander.

"Ah---ah---", seeing his son wave his small hands in reply, the Supreme Commander couldn't help but say "Is that so? Is that so? Good son, I'll depend on you from now on!" and smiled happily. And so such happy times went on.

Rihan's charming smile momentarily filled up the gaping wound caused by the Fox.

After strolling on the streets for a while, the Supreme Commander stopped the box cart in front of the vegetable and fruit shop.

Even though he could also buy from the street vendors, but the selection in the shop is still more comprehensive.

The Supreme Commander carried Rihan out of box cart and called for the shop keeper.

The person who came out to attend to the customers is the owner of the shop, who had a tan. He had a towel tied on his head, and had a pleasantly gruff voice.

The vegetables in the shop all had beautifully vibrant colours.

After telling the owner the types and quantity of vegetables that Youhime and Setsura asked for, the owner responded with a nod each time and placed the ingredients into the cart.

After paying, the Supreme Commander left the shop.

Even though he was carrying Rihan in one arm, and pushed the box cart with the other, he didn't have any difficulty walking. Even fully loaded, the box cart moved smoothly.

After returning to the Nura mansion, the Supreme Commander arrived at the back door.

"Hey! I'm back."

Hearing the voice of the Supreme Commander, Youhime came out, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Ah! Ayakashi-sama, you're back."

"These vegetables are great."

The Supreme Commander said as he passed Rihan to Youhime, and took the ingredients out from the cart and placed it on the raised floor.

"First is radish right? Then carrots, cucumber, burdock..."

Just then, Setsura and Karasu Tengu appeared.

"Ohh! They look beautiful." Karasu Tengu said.

"That's right! Then there's lotus root, yam...and finally, a baby."

After placing the unfamiliar baby on the floor, the Supreme Commander stood there, stunned.

"...Baby?"

He looked at the baby sitting on the floor, then looked at Rihan in his wife's arms, and looked back at the baby on the floor again.

"Ehhhhhh?"

Karasu Tengu turned towards the very confused Supreme Commander, his voice trembling,

"Su...Supreme Commander...this baby is...?"

The baby, wrapped in a simple cloth, looked like less than a year old, around the same age as Rihan.

"The vegetables are beautiful, and so is the baby."

With cold eyes and a cold tone, the one who said that is Setsura.

"Hey hey hey! What is the meaning of this?"

It seems like on the way home after ending the grocery trip plus walk, this baby suddenly appeared from the box cart.

"Isn't this your child?"

"That's impossible!"

The Supreme Commander shouted loudly, at that moment, the unfamiliar baby let out an "Ah~~" and stretched his arms out towards the Supreme Commander innocently.

"See! He's calling for his father."

"Yuki-onna, please stop joking already!"

"Supreme Commander, an illegitimate son is a serious issue."

Karasu Tengu's tone was serious and stern.

"Karasu Tengu, you're suspecting me too?"

"I knew you would cause this kind of trouble one day."

"Listen to me! I don't know how this baby came about..."

At that moment, the Supreme Commander seemed to realise something, and turned towards his wife.

“You...Youhime?”

Youhime, who was carrying Rihan, was trembling slightly. Even though her lips were clamped shut, but it seems like tears were going to escape from her large eyes.

“You...Youhime...it’s not what you think...”

“...it’s not...what...?”

After saying that sentence, Youhime took a deep breath.

---Oh no, it’s going to start...

Even though they knew what was going to occur next, the Supreme Commander, Karasu Tengu, Setsura and the other youkai couldn’t do anything about it.

After combining the anger in her body together with the air in her lungs---

“Aya—kashi---sama---!”

A voice loud enough to shake up Edo castle, finally erupted from that small body.

The Youhime mountain which they thought would not act up again, exploded once more.

Chapter 3

They moved from the kitchen to the living room. What exactly happened to lead to this, the interrogation session was unavoidable.

When he was buying the vegetables at the shop, the Supreme Commander would sometimes look at other products, or talk to Rihan, whom he was carrying in his arms, therefore, there are times where he would take his eyes off the cart. Even when he was paying the shop owner, he did not pay attention to the cart. It was possible that someone took that chance to place the baby in the cart. That was the only explanation the Supreme Commander could think of.

“Is that really what happened? I advise you to tell the truth.”

Setsura said, intentionally provoking the situation.

“You’re really annoying.”

The Supreme Commander glared at her.

“Then again, why are you carrying that baby?”

“What choice do I have? It’s not like we could just leave him lying there.”

After Youhime blew her top, the unfamiliar baby started crying loudly like he had been scalded.

And because Karasu Tengu was too small, he was unable to carry the baby, and the Supreme Commander was busy trying to calm Youhime down, so in the end, Setsura, who couldn’t tolerate it anymore, picked up the baby. And that was when the baby stopped crying. Therefore everyone started the interrogation while carrying the babies.

“It seems to me that you’re the mother of that kid.”

“Is that so? Then who should be the father of this child? Oh ho ho...”

Hearing the dangerous conversation between the Supreme Commander and Setsura, Karasu Tengu coughed once.

"Youhime-san and young master Rihan are here, would the two of you stop joking about this?"

After saying that, Karasu Tengu glanced that Youhime, who was sitting on the floor with Rihan in her arms.

Even though she looked quite weary, she wasn't as worked up as before, and was regaining her calm.

"Ayakashi-sama, I was too rash before, I'm sorry."

"It's fine! Faced with a situation like that, it's normal to react in that way."

The husband and wife pair talked about what occurred just minutes ago. To be able to calm down so quickly from the volcanic eruption, it was really surprising.

That was because they quickly found evidence that proved that the unfamiliar baby was not an illegitimate child of the Supreme Commander.

"But to leave after leaving a letter is really too much. This just shows how much that person doesn't love children."

Hitotsume said, an unlit pipe in his mouth. After hearing the commotion in kitchen, Hitotsume ran over to investigate, and join the interrogation party.

This letter was found on the floor of the box cart.

The handwriting in the letter had steady and bold strokes. Its contents was that this child could not be taken care of due to certain reasons, so the child had to left there, and it was hoped that a kindred soul would be able to raise the child. The child's name was also written inside---Genosuke.

With such a letter, the child was definitely not the illegitimate child of the Supreme Commander.

"Hmph! Even if there is an explanation, the child was still abandoned, this sort of person has no right to be a parent."

Setsura criticised harshly, like a nail piercing through steel. Seeing her angry expression, Hitotsume fumbled with his words for a while before he finally forced himself to agree with her.

"We can't just leave the baby in this situation. But based on this letter alone, the information we have is really limited..."

Youhime voiced her reservations. Karasu Tengu nodded in agreement.

"My lady is correct, we need to quickly find the parents of this child. Aiming to sever all ties with just a letter isn't right, not to mention pushing the responsibility of raising this child to the Nura Clan."

"Forget it. The person probably doesn't know who I am."

The Supreme Commander said. Then Setsura turned to him and asked,

"Hey! Did you see anyone suspicious, like a person carrying a baby and looking around, things like that?"

"Not at all."

"Che! Useless."

"Stop that already! There are so many people there, how can I pay attention to so many things?"

"Okay, that's enough. Would the both of you stop bickering?"

Seeing the two youkai quarrel like two children, Karasu Tengu couldn't help but chide them.

"Looks like the only clue we have is this letter."

Hitotsume said.

"That's right."

Karasu Tengu nodded, then he glanced over at the soundly sleeping baby known as Genosuke in Setsura's arms.

Maybe some clues could be found in the cloth wrapped around the baby, so everyone had already taken a look at it.

However, the rough material, which looked like it had been washed many times, showed no signs of repair, and no protective amulets were sown on it.

"From this handwriting, it should be a man."

Hitotsume said. Karasu Tengu nodded in agreement.

But, they could not conclude that the person who put the baby in the cart was a man.

"Anyway, let's have some members investigate the area around the vegetable shop."

Karasu Tengu concluded.

"But during the investigation, it's best not to say that we are looking for a man. Tell them to ask if there was a suspicious person carrying a baby. It could be a man, a woman, or a couple."

"I think a lot of people might have seen one."

Setsura, who was gently rocking the baby, spoke.

"There was a man with long hair carrying a baby, and he was pushing a strange cart...most people would probably say something like that."

"Aren't you talking about me?"

The Supreme Commander pouted.

"That's right! So be careful when you're gathering information, don't drag our Supreme Commander into this."

Setsura wasn't joking when she said that, and had raised a very valid point. Karasu Tengu agreed with it as well.

"Yeah! That was a very valid issue, I will ask them to take note of this."

The interrogation has ended, and a course of action has been decided. Since this matter cannot be dragged on for too long, it should be acted on immediately.

If the person who left the baby decides to leave Edo, the progress of the investigation will be slowed down by a lot.

After Karasu Tengu quickly went to give instructions to the members of the clan, they quickly changed into their human forms and took to the streets, and carried out their investigation, with their search area centred at the vegetable store. At the same time, they also asked the crows flying over the skies of Edo for assistance.

With the instructions passed down, now all they had to do was to wait for the results.

Everyone waited in the living room where the interrogation took place, this includes the Supreme Commander, who was scowling, plus Youhime and Setsura, who sat on his right and left sides. Youhime was carrying Rihan...while Setsura was carrying Genosuke.

---Such a harmonious scene.

Karasu Tengu thought, but he quickly got rid of that inappropriate thought.

He had thought it was harmonious because of the symmetry, not because this situation actually made sense.

In addition, Setsura, who was carrying Genosuke, had a unexpectedly warm look on her face, which cause Karasu Tengu to smile happily, but when he calmly thought about it, this situation is really abnormal.

Maybe it was because they heard the news, Natto Kazo and the other small youkai came to the living room one after another to see what was going on.

“Wah! It’s true! It really looks like a first and second wife!”

“Won’t there be a conflict because of inheritance?”

“The Supreme Commander really messed up this time!”

Even though they were really small, because of the sheer number, they still made a significant amount of noise.

“What’s with all that noise! Bastards! Go away!”

The Supreme Commander got up on one knee and shouted loudly, the small youkai disappeared quickly.

After chasing the small youkai away, a man entered the living room.

“Greetings, Supreme Commander, I just arrived in Edo from Mount Nejireme.”

It was Gyuuki.

Mount Nejireme is far away from Edo, so Gyuuki would always set off a few days before the start of the General Meeting, arriving at the Nura Clan mansion early.

Seeing the Supreme Commander between Youhime and Setsura, with both of them carrying a baby each, Gyuuki’s eyes widened momentarily. Then he finally forced himself to speak,

“...Supreme Commander, you already have Youhime-san, how can you do something so immoral...you actually had an affair with Setsura, and even sired a child...”

“You’re making the situation sound worse than it’s supposed to be!”

After giving a sigh, the Supreme Commander started to talk about what happened at the vegetable shop.

Chapter 4

Because action was taken quickly, information started coming in the next day.

Some people had seen a man who looked like a wandering Samurai carrying a baby and hanging around the vegetable and fruit shop. The man was wearing a dark coloured kimono, a sword at his waist, sporting the hairstyle of a wandering Samurai and did not have a cart or anything like that. This meant that the man being described wasn’t the Supreme Commander, but someone else.

After a more detailed investigation, they also knew what the man looked like. A sharp gaze, narrow forehead and a one inch long scar on his left cheek. Judging from the progress, it would not be long before that are able to locate the man.

The third day after the Supreme Commander went to the vegetable and fruit shop, the members of the clan were able to locate the home of the man who looked like a wandering Samurai.

Based on the results of the secret investigation by asking the people living nearby, the man always had a baby living with him, but a few days ago, he was suddenly alone. In addition, when he was living with the baby, there was no sign of a wife or a woman by his side.

The situation matched well. This man, without any doubt, is Genosuke's father.

"What is this guy trying to pull? We should catch him and teach him a good lesson."

Hitotsume said angrily, and most of the clan members agreed as well, but Karasu Tengu still asked for the Supreme Commander's opinion...

"Supreme Commander, what do you plan to do?"

Since they already found where he lived, it would be easy to kidnap and bring him back. As long as the Supreme Commander waved a finger, it won't even take thirty minutes to do so.

However, the Supreme Commander only held the unlit pipe in one hand, like he was thinking of something. He seemed to be staring at Genosuke, who was playing with Setsura some distance away.

Setsura was currently playing with Genosuke by making beads out of ice. Seeing Genosuke laughing happily, Setsura also gave a small smile.

"Ayakashi-sama, don't be too rash..."

Youhime said tactfully. Rihan, who was in her arms, seemed to wish to join in the bead game, as seen by how he kept stretching his hands out to Genosuke.

After a while, the Supreme Commander finally spoke.

"We already know about the man's residence and appearance and will be able to catch him anytime. However, before capturing him, it would be good to ask him for an explanation."

"Supreme Commander, do you mean..."

Karasu Tengu asked. The Supreme Commander only nodded and stood up. Then he quickly walked towards Genosuke.

Setsura only had time to give an "Ah!" of surprise before Genosuke ended up in the Supreme Commander's arms.

"Genosuke, let me make sure if your father is really such a heartless man."

The longhouse where the wandering Samurai lived in was in a small street not too far from the vegetable and fruit store.

As the Supreme Commander had obtained information about which unit from the entrance of the longhouse did the man live in, he found the home of the man quickly.

The bell signalling 2pm that just sounded.

The Supreme Commander, carrying Genosuke, stood in front of the man's door. He did not have any clan members with him. It was just him and Genosuke.

Even though the door was closed tightly, the presence of a person could be felt inside.

"Sorry for disturbing."

After the Supreme Commander gave a greeting, he opened the door.

The room was simple, and a man was sitting on the wooden floor, his appearance exactly the same as the clan member's descriptions.

The man did have a scar on his face, but he didn't look fierce or threatening because of it. He had narrow eyes and a high nose bridge, and actually looked handsome.

"You don't have time to take care of a baby, yet you have the time to maintain your weapon, is that right?"

After saying that, the Supreme Commander smiled. The man seemed to have been mentally prepared for it and put his sword and cleaning tools aside, bowing deeply.

"I am very sorry, please forgive the uncivilised actions from this lowly person."

"Whether to forgive you or not, I'll decide after hearing your reasons."

Just then, Genosuke let out a soft cry and stretched out his arms towards the man.

"Genosuke..."

The man moaned out Genosuke's name, and closed his eyes tightly.

"I'm coming in."

The Supreme Commander took off his sandals after saying that, and stepped onto the floor.

After sitting opposite the man, Genosuke started wriggling around, like he wanted to be free of the Supreme Commander's hold and return to his father. The man also held out his arms, planning to receive his son. But the Supreme Commander did not lift Genosuke off his lap.

"Genosuke, shh, just a little while more."

After calming Genosuke down, the Supreme Commander looked at the man, his expression strict and serious, and said,

"Okay, tell me why you did this."

"Yes! This lowly person will tell you everything honestly..."

The wandering Samurai straightened his back, and started to talk steadily---

The man's name is Tamiya Shinzaemon. Half a year ago, he was a Samurai for one of the provinces in the northern region. However, due to some reasons, he left the province and is now living in the longhouses of Edo.

Genosuke was born around one year ago. At that time, his wife died due to inadequate care after labour.

With the huge shock of receiving a blessed son at the cost of losing his wife, Shinzaemon went about his life like a living corpse.

He left Genosuke, who needed much care, to an aging maid as he lost himself in alcohol. Because he loved his wife too much, he wasn't able to use the warmth of other women to escape reality. Shinzaemon, who had no interest in women or gambling, could only rely on alcohol and drank more and more over time.

Slowly, Shinzaemon was on the road of no return and his habit started to affect his job. But even with that, he continued to despair and destroy himself.

Because of Shinzaemon's unacceptable behaviour, his employer started to prepare for his dismissal, but Shinzaemon ignored all the warnings and did not improve.

In the end, Shinzaemon was dismissed and lost his salary. Therefore, he could only take the baby and wander the streets.

At that time, a group of people lent a hand to Shinzaemon, who had nowhere to go.

This group of people worked with him when he was in the city and they also trained at the same dojo, Shinzaemon's juniors. They visited Shinzaemon countless times, often giving him encouragement and occasionally, a scolding. They also spoke to the higher officials many times in the attempt to secure Shinzaemon's job.

Having been moved deeply by such strong friendship, Shinzaemon slowly recovered from his trauma. If he continued to ignore this friendship, he wouldn't be a proper human. The last shred of his rationality changed Shinzaemon's way of thinking.

"Such a good group of friends."

The Supreme Commander commented. Shinzaemon nodded.

Even though the hole caused by his dead wife would never heal fully, but he is at least able to lead a normal life. At this time, a chance came---

One day, he was summoned to the mansion of the second in command of the province.

The second in command is a very high position, Shinzaemon would normally be unable to meet him when he is working. In the past, he had only heard descriptions of the second in command's appearance, but had not talked with him before.

After being brought through the large mansion garden to a room, Shinzaemon was met with the second in command known as Toku Seizo.

The second in command is a fat man, with a lot of mass on his face. The eyes buried within the meat of his cheeks may be small, but it couldn't hide the sly look.

Toku quickly went straight to the point.

---I want your help.

He said softly.

---Help me kill someone. He is a traitor, leaving him alive would just bring harm to society, so it is okay to kill him, you don't have to feel guilty about it.

"Dare I ask who this person is?" Shinzaemon asked nervously. What he heard from Toku, with a voice so soft that it could be mistaken for breathing, was the Commander's name.

Shinzaemon was momentarily stunned.

This was equivalent to an assassination order, and the target was the commander of the province.

The rumours of the commander being a traitor, Shinzaemon has heard of it. He controlled the politically inexperienced province leader from the shadows, and often took part in bribery, filling his pockets.

---This is for the future of our province. Shinzaemon, we will pay you well, so do a good job.

Toku said.

However, when he heard Toku say "This is for the future of our province", Shinzaemon sensed the intent behind this sentence.

If the commander died, the next in power in the province would be this Toku Seizo. He decided to use Shinzaemon to get rid of his obstacle.

As to why this task was given to Shinzaemon, it was because of his strong skill with the sword.

---I heard that you were the Assistant Instructor at the Hanada Dojo, is that right?

There was a Hanada Dojo in the city, teaching the Guishui ryu. Guishui ryu was always known for its elite sword skill, a very famous dojo.

Shinzaemon is a skilled practitioner in that dojo, and his skill is seen as unmatched by any other ever since the dojo was founded.

---You should be willing, Shinzaemon?

Toku placed his fat hand on Shinzaemon's shoulder.

Truthfully, Shinzaemon did not wish to accept this task. When he was drowning himself in alcohol, he had not touched the sword at all. Even though he had started practicing again, his body had already been harmed by alcohol and he is not confident that he would be able to regain his skills from before.

In addition, such a thing as assassination did not suit Shinzaemon's personality at all.

However, Shinzaemon did not have any other choice but to accept the job. This was an order issued by the second in command. If he knew the details and declined the job, he would also be a target of assassination.

Using such underhanded methods is just like Toku. First inviting Shinzaemon to his house, then telling him such a huge secret, thus forcing him to carry the evil burden of helping to killing someone, a silent threat.

Shinzaemon nodded, indicating that he was willing to carry out the task.

After deciding the day that he should act, Shinzaemon returned home, full of worry.

But, after seeing Genosuke's face, Shinzaemon started to feel very regretful. Three days later, he would have to kill the Commander, who is going to leave the city.

Thinking that he will soon be using the hands that killed the commander to carry his son, Shinzaemon started to hesitate, but at this time, he is unable to turn back.

Feeling very troubled, Shinzaemon waited for the day when he is to carry out his task.

Unexpectedly, in the end, Shinzaemon did not kill the commander.

Two days after Shinzaemon was summoned for the secret talk with Toku, news had spread that the commander had passed away. It seemed like he had been hiding the fact that he was severely ill.

Two days after receiving the news of the death, Shinzaemon was summoned to Toku's mansion once again.

Toku asked for a table of wine and side dishes and said while smiling,

---I would never have thought that that guy would contract a serious illness, but it is good that he is dead, that saved a lot of trouble.

Being able to smile when talking about someone's death, Shinzaemon felt that this person really had no conscience at all. Of course, he did not say that out loud. In addition, Shinzaemon also felt that with the other party's death, he did not have to dirty his hands to solve the situation. He didn't feel happy, but was very thankful to god.

After staying at Toku's mansion for one hour, Shinzaemon returned home.

However, on the way home, Shinzaemon was attacked. His surroundings were dark, and the other party had their faces covered, so he was unable to discern who the attackers were.

Shinzaemon, after defeating his attackers with some difficulty, finally understood everything---Toku wanted to silence him.

This evil person had never intended to let Shinzaemon live. Even though the commander had died of illness, but Toku's traitorous plan of wanting to kill the commander was still present in Shinzaemon.

It maybe because he was paranoid, or to be more clear about this, he is afraid that after he grasped the power over the province, Shinzaemon might come back to blackmail him, which is why he is doing this.

Even though his suspicions were way off the mark, but with a person like Toku, there is no way to reason with him.

After defeating the masked assassins, Shinzaemon rushed home to fire his maid, and with Genosuke, he escaped the province.

There is no safe place in this province anymore.

Therefore, Shinzaemon came to Edo. Edo, with a large number of people entering from many regions, was the best place to hide.

Chapter 5

“---That is what happened half a year ago.”

Shinzaemon's low voice was like a lullaby, Genosuke had started to doze on the Supreme Commander's lap.

“I see! Now I know how you ended up living in this longhouse.”

After speaking, the Supreme Commander nodded.

“But you have not explained the main thing, why did you place this baby into my cart?”

So Shinzaemon continued speaking,

“Even though I have given up my status and lived a hard life, but our lives were not in danger for the past half year. However, four days ago, a man suddenly arrived at my home. The man's name is Katakiri Denshirou, and had trained at the dojo with me. He said that he is an assassin sent by Toku, and came here to end my life.”

“The assassin specially came to your house to inform you and even told you his name? He is being really nice.”

“Katakiri and I have some history together, and we have competed before to determine who is more skilled in the dojo. At that time, everyone thought that Katakiri and I are equally matched and wanted us to have a match. But that is only on the surface, by right, the more skilled one is Katakiri.”

The result of the match with wooden swords was a close win in Shinzaemon's favour, however, that was a just case of good luck. During the whole course of the match, Katakiri maintained a huge advantage, but because a bee suddenly flew in his line of sight, his sword stance was disrupted. Shinzaemon simply used that opening to land a hit on Katakiri, that was all there is to it. Even though Shinzaemon won in the end, but Katakiri's hard blows had given him many injuries as well, one of which is the scar on his face.

After the match, Katakiri left the dojo, with the reason of travelling around the country to improve his sword skills. Afterwards, he became an assassin for Toku due to some circumstances, and appeared in front of Shinzaemon.

"---Katakiri insists that he wants to have a face-off with me without any dirty tricks, so he has declared that he will not attack me when I am in a dangerous situation."

Then, Katakiri set a time and asked for a one-on-one duel.

"So a fight. You agreed?"

Shinzaemon nodded.

"If I did not agree, Katakiri would do something bad to Genosuke, he planned to burn down the longhouse..."

The duel was set to be at 5am in the morning two days from now. Then Katakiri said a name of an abandoned temple, that would be the location of his and Shinzaemon's duel.

Shinzaemon sat upright again, and said while looking at the Supreme Commander in the eyes,

"Honestly, it would be difficult for me to win Katakiri with my skills, and I might even lose my life. If that happens, no one would be able to take care of Genosuke. In addition, even if I am able to defeat Katakiri, Toku already knows that I live here, so even if I got rid of Katakiri, there will be other assassins. No matter where I move, the reprieve will be temporary, nothing would change."

"Because you are being targeted by assassins, and are unable to take care of the baby, so you wrote a letter and placed it on the baby, depositing both of them into my cart, is that right?"

At that time, Shinzaemon placed both his palms on the floor, bowed deeply and shouted, sadness in his tone,

"I know that my actions are very selfish! But if this goes on, both me and my son would die sooner or later! It doesn't matter if I die, but at least the child... at least Genosuke must live on! He is my precious son!"

"So you threw the responsibility of raising him to me?"

"I beg you... please grant the wish of the father who is going to pass away!"

---A father who is going to die, and a precious son...

The Supreme Commander sighed quietly and spoke slowly,

"Do you know who I am?"

"No! I do not have any idea."

Shinzaemon maintained his bowing position and shook his head.

"I am a youkai."

Hearing this, Shinzaemon's head shot upwards.

"The humans call me Nurarihyon. I am the Lord of Pandemonium, the Supreme Commander of the Nura Clan."

“Nurarihyon...”

“You may have seen me as a good person, so you passed your son to me, but this could be a wrong decision, you know. My mansion is filled with youkai after all, they are hundred demons who do bad things, if this brat lives in my house, I do not know how many days he would live...”

The Supreme Commander twisted his mouth in an evil manner as he stared at Shinzaemon.

However, even though Shinzaemon’s shoulders were heaving due to his heavy breathing, he did not look away, and looked straight at the Supreme Commander. He showed no signs of fear on his face, but showed a strong will that seemed to see through everything.

It doesn’t matter if it’s a human or a youkai. I will see if I can entrust my son to the man in front of me --- that was the message that Shinzaemon was sending through his gaze.

The Supreme Commander did not shield away as well, and looked at him head on. The two parties remained that way for quite some time.

After a while, the Supreme Commander’s expression change to that of mirth as he let out a smile. He hit his palm against his knee as he smiled broadly.

“Hahaha, I’m so sorry that I said such a humourless joke.”

“.....”

Shinzaemon narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Relax, Shinzaemon, the Nura Clan will help you take care of Genosuke.”

“Really?”

“Really, I am not a youkai who lies. Since I already have a baby at my house, it’s just a case of another mouth to feed.”

“A baby... is it the baby you were carrying in your arms that day...?”

“That’s right, his name is Rihan, my precious son.”

Shinzaemon lifted his head and bowed once again, saying to the Supreme Commander,

“... Nurarihyon-sama, I am thankful to you. I already have the resolution to die, I am not lying about this...”

“Okay okay, I am aware of your will, do not speak of it anymore.”

The Supreme Commander quickly calmed Shinzaemon down, and said,

“I am also the father of a child, so I can understand your feelings, you can leave the child to me.”

“I’ll leave it to you!” Shinzaemon said in reply.

“The duel is in two days, right?”

The Supreme Commander said in a calm tone.

“That’s right...”

“Even though I would like to say go fight without any worries... but you better not lose your life.”

Shinzaemon nodded solemnly.

Then, the Supreme Commander, not wanting to wake up Genosuke, who is sleeping in his arms, rose slowly and stepped off the raised wooden floor.

“Since everything is settled, then I am leaving. If he wakes up and starts crying, there will be a problem, it would be best to leave while he is still sleeping.”

Shinzaemon stood up as well to escort the Supreme Commander to the door.

Just as the Supreme Commander was about to walk off, he suddenly said,

“Even though I said I was a youkai earlier, you did not reach for your sword.”

“Yes!”

“You didn’t look at your weapon at all, and looked straight at me.”

Shinzaemon went silent for a moment, then he relaxed visibly and said,

“Whether a person should be killed or not, one would be able to tell from their eyes. Nurarihyon-sama does not have the look of a despicable person.”

“Heh! Is that so? You flatter me too much.”

“Nurarihyon-sama...”

Shinzaemon’s face turned serious once more.

“I’ll leave Genosuke to you.”

After saying that, Shinzaemon bowed.

Chapter 6

“So that’s the situation. This kid will be living with us from now on, take good care of him.”

The Supreme Commander’s merry voice was heard in the Main Hall, causing a ruckus amongst the youkai inside.

The Supreme Commander, who brought the baby away, had return with the baby, and even made such an announcement.

“Hey, Supreme Commander, is this really okay?”

Hitotsume said, an expression of disbelief on his face.

“Of course there is no problem, or I wouldn’t have brought him back.”

“But we don’t have a duty to take care of his child. I don’t care about the fact that he has met up with an assassin, this has nothing to do with us.”

“We already know about his troubles, so even if it has nothing to do with us, we still have to help. One more kid wouldn’t cause that much trouble anyway, there are so many youkai in this house, we just have to take turns to take care of him.”

The Supreme Commander, carrying Genosuke, rebuked Hitotsume’s words easily. Hitotsume, who had nothing valid to say in return, could only bite down on his pipe.

“You’re really too naïve.”

Setsura said as she shook her head in frustration, but Karasu Tengu did not miss the happy expression on her face.

“Okay, Geno, come here quickly.”

Then Setsura quickly took Genosuke from the Supreme Commander, and it seemed like she felt very excited.

With regards to her husband’s decision, Youhime was rather relieved.

Genosuke seemed rather interested in the Karasu Tengu feather toy that Rihan held in his hand, and kept stretching his hand out like he wanted to touch it. Youhime and Setsura smiled as they saw his scene. Even though this scene seemed to peaceful for a youkai mansion that followed the ways of the underground, since no one seemed to be troubled by it, there was no need to plan for anything else.

At that moment, a deep voice could be heard from the corner of the Main Hall.

“... But, regarding the background of the wandering Samurai Tamiya Shinzaemon, it is best that we investigate it. I heard that even though that place is just a small province, but it is politically unstable. We do not know what the current situation in that place is...”

With a hand under his chin, the one who spoke in a serious low voice is the clan member Gyuuki.

“Gyuuki...”

Nurarihyon said quietly,

“Why are you still here...”

Chapter 7

The sound of the clashing of swords, which belonged to Tamiya Shinzaemon and Katakiri Denshirou were heard in the abandoned temple.

Sam in the morning, Shinzaemon honoured the agreement and arrived at the location of the duel. He saw that Katakiri was already waiting for him.

Compared to the times when they trained together in the dojo in their hometown, Katakiri’s face had grown old, with flabby cheeks.

As the two parties stared at one another, they only said a few sentences.

“Tamiya, you didn’t run away, very good.”

“Even if I ran away, you would come after me, it would be useless.”

“Good that you know that, it’s better to be more decisive.”

“Katakiri, why did you become an assassin? How about your sword training?”

“I have always been training, and I have become stronger. In addition, I have understood that strength can bring you large sums of money.”

“Toku promised to pay you after you succeed?”

“Would it be any different even if you knew the answer?”

The conversation between the two people ended there, and they started to cross swords.

Toku had indeed grown stronger compared to before.

When he was still in the dojo, Katakiri had a reputation of being strict and detailed with his sword play, but it might have been because his style changed after training, his strikes were now more rough and vicious.

The hard and quick blows slowly ate away at Shinzaemon's strength.

Even though he did not get any lethal injuries, but Shinzamon's body was covered in sword cut, and his breathing was messy. However, not only was Katakiri breathing steadily, he even gave a smile.

"Tamiya, you have become weak. No! Even before, you were just as weak."

"....."

"Because you had help from a bee, you were able to get the title of the strongest."

Shinzaemon's face, covered in sweat and blood, broke out into a laugh.

"Hahaha, that's true. However, luck is also an aspect of skill, and you, do not have anything like that."

"Hmph! It's fine if you wish to want to continue being cheeky."

Katakiri's suddenly had a very serious expression on his face, then with a loud shout, he rushed towards Shinzaemon.

The killing intent, materialising into a blade, flew towards him. Shinzaemon knew that he would die with this attack. He couldn't avoid the blow or use this sword to deflect it, but he decided that he would receive that attack with his eyes open.

However, Katakiri's blade suddenly lost its power.

It could be because of the dew dripping from the trees, or an insect even smaller than a bee, Katakiri closed his eyes on reflex, diminishing the power of the attack.

The goddess of luck smiled upon Shinzaemon once more.

Shinzaemon took the chance to cut Katakiri's right arm, and their bodies brushed past once another.

Turning around quickly, Katakiri had also turned around immediately. His eyes had yet to lose their vigour, but Shinzaemon's attack from before did inflict a serious injury. His injured arm could not exert anymore force and the tip of his blade was shaking slightly.

"Katakiri, let's leave it as this."

"What..."

"Luck is on my side this time. Even though you are better at the sword, but your arm cannot wield the sword anymore."

"Hmph! Are you pitying me?"

"We used to be from the same dojo, so we're friends, aren't we?"

"Don't be so naïve. That's disgusting."

"Katakiri..."

"Tamiya, isn't it too early to determine the results of this duel? I am an assassin and I cannot allow you to return alive."

Katakiri's words seemed to be some sort of code, and from the back of the dilapidated temple hall, a few shadows appeared. There were about ten people, and they were dressed like wandering Samurai, holding swords, with smiles on their faces like they were about to tear their prey apart.

"Katakiri, you... didn't we agree that this is going to be a one-on-one duel?"

"It was supposed to be one before this, but it is different now. Tamiya, congratulations, now you can reunite with your wife."

The wandering Samurai rushed forward, surrounding Shinzaemon.

"Attack!"

Even before Katakiri finished his sentence, the group of people attacked. After blocking the first attack, Shinzaemon realised that he had spent all his energy.

The attack which injured Katakiri's arm had used up all his stamina.

---Is that so... so I won't be able to escape death after all...

The strange thing is, he felt relaxed and satisfied.

---Genosuke...

The name of his son appeared in his mind.

---Genosuke, it seems like I will die after all. But I will not die in vain. With the last of my strength, I will rid the world of these despicable and evil men!

After making his decision, Shinzaemon lifted his sword.

The group of people attacked from different directions. Shinzaemon blocked their blows and retaliated with an even more aggressive attack. Even though the attack missed, the wandering Samurai widened their eyes in shock, surprised that Shinzaemon could perform such a powerful move.

What came next was an attack from behind. Shinzaemon turned, avoiding the attack, but he could feel that he was cut slightly in the back, a searing pain spread throughout his whole body. But, being able to feel pain is a good thing, because that meant that his body was still functioning, and he could still fight.

At that moment, a powerful voice was heard in the air.

"Shinzaemon, I have witnessed your determination!"

The voice came from the building to their left. Turning in that direction, Nurarihyon was standing there holding a sword, the cart was also at his side.

"Nurarihyon-sama, why are you..."

"I wanted Geno to see your cool side, so I brought him along."

"Letting Genosuke watch the battle..."

"If it was a one-on-one duel, I wouldn't interfere even if it ended with your death. However, since the opponent has assistants, I definitely would not ignore it. Let me lend you a hand."

After saying that, Nurarihyon drew his sword.

"Genosuke, wait here obediently."

After placing the sheath gently into the cart, Nurarihyon, sword in hand, approached the group slowly.

“Who are you?!”

Katakiri shouted angrily. The other wandering Samurai also pointed their swords towards Nurarihyon, ready for an attack. However, even when faced with a group of enemies, Nurarihyon was calm, continuing his approach without any fear.

“Nurarihyon-sama, it’s too dangerous.”

Shinzaemon said sternly to Nurarihyon, who is beside him now.

“You don’t need to care about the helpers, just concentrate on your battle.”

“But...”

“Shinzaemon, this time I will do the unusual and follow you.”

“Follow me...?”

“Yeah! Normally, there will be a Hundred Demons at my back, but only for today, I am willing to be your Hundred Demons. Even though I am alone, but being Supreme Commander, I am the same as a group of Hundred Demons.”

Seeing the Supreme Commander give a mischievous smile, Shinzaemon couldn’t help but smile too. Unexpectedly, his body seemed to be recovering its strength.

“What are you waiting for? Attack!”

With one command from Katakiri, the wandering Samurai, who had stopped, started to attack once more.

Now, Shinzaemon could no longer smell the approaching stench of death. He will win, and return alive. His feet moved nimbly. The strength he needed to overcome the opponent had also returned.

Shinzaemon sometimes avoided the attacks, and other times, deflected them, then he would aim for their arms or legs. The more he moved, the lighter his body felt.

About half of the numbers were dealt with by Nurarihyon.

Even though Shinzaemon had always felt that this person should be rather powerful, but he never thought that he would be this strong. He had not trained in a dojo before, but he was skilled and elegant with the sword, with no unnecessary movements. If he could describe it, it would be *very charismatic*.

When faced with the attacks from the wandering Samurai, Nurarihyon would dodge quickly and strike a painful blow to their bodies.

“You scum!”

“You dare to attack the great me!”

“Do you wish to die!”

“You’re really brave, aren’t you!”

“It’s too early for you!”

“Go back and start from the beginning!”

“Then you can challenge me again!”

Every time he struck the opponent, Nurarihyon would say something cool, such that the person watching would feel very excited. Even though his attacks did not draw blood, the wandering Samurai were beginning to lose their fighting spirit.

“Who... who is this person? He is too strong!”

“The guy called Tamiya is also really strong!”

The wandering Samurai started to keep their distance from Shinzaemon and Nurarihyon, gathering at the same place.

“God, these people are unreasonably strong! Even with higher rewards, it’s really not worth it! Let’s run!”

The leader of the wandering Samurai ran off after saying this, and the others followed him. The hurried footsteps soon faded, and the surroundings became quiet. Nurarihyon smiled,

“These people have no regard for their comrades, running first when they encounter trouble.”

Tamiya gritted his teeth while he glared at Nurarihyon, his sword arm dripping blood. His sleeve, saturated with blood seemed like it would spray blood once it is flicked, the injury was serious.

“Katakiri, you should leave too. I can spare your life if you stop now.”

Shinzaemon said.

“...Shut up! I already said that I am an assassin, even if I have to put my life on the line, I would take yours!”

“Then I have no choice.”

Shinzaemon raised his sword once more.

Katakiri raised his sword as well, ready to respond to the challenge. But with one glance, it can be seen that his right arm held no power.

“If the two of you wish to continue your duel, then I will take my leave first.”

Saying that, Nurarihyon left Shinzaemon’s side and stood some distance away.

After a scuffle, the atmosphere was soon thick with anxiety.

Katakiri moved slightly to the side. Shinzaemon also moved in the same manner.

The two parties pinned their stares on one another. Katakiri seemed to be exerting himself just by holding the sword.

Then, Katakiri’s gaze shifted to the side building.

Shinzaemon knew he was looking at the cart.

---Don’t tell me...

Shinzaemon’s eyes widened. What is he planning to do to Genosuke...?

However, Katakiri’s gaze returned to Shinzaemon quickly.

“Tamiya!”

With a shout, Katakiri rushed forward.

Just as the two people crossed paths, Shinzaemon landed a slash on Katakiri’s body. Katakiri suddenly stopped his charge, Shinzaemon stopped as well.

Shinzaemon turned his head, and saw that Katakiri's back was facing him. After a while, Katakiri's body started to shake, and he collapsed on the ground. Then, blood slowly flowed out from under his body.

After exhaling, Shinzaemon put down his sword.

Katakiri Denshirou's gaze had landed on the cart, he might have wanted to snatch the baby and used it to restrict Shinzaemon's movement.

But he did not do so. At that last moment, Katakiri made a choice that would not taint the reputation of the swordsmen.

"Katakiri..."

Shinzaemon muttered his name.

Chapter 8

"Nurarihyon-sama, thank you for your help."

Shinzaemon lowered his head.

"But, I hope this is the last time. Even though it ended up fine this time, I cannot guarantee that I will be able to escape death next time."

"I know! But because of the circumstances this time, I must interfere."

The Supreme Commander said as he nodded.

The battle had ended. Shinzaemon and Nurarihyon sheathed their swords. Genosuke, who had been lulled to sleep earlier, had grabbed the bars, standing inside the cart.

"I do not know when the next group of assassins will come, but they will come to me. Even if they might not be as skilled as Katakiri, it might still be dangerous..."

Shinzaemon said as he kept glancing at a certain spot, it was where the body of Katakiri was lying. Tomorrow, he might just end up in the same state, Shinzaemon said.

Just then, Genosuke gave a childish cry and stretched out his arms, like he wanted his father's hug.

However, Shinzaemon did not look at him. If he looked at his son, he would want to hug him, and he would never want to leave his son alone again. Shinzaemon bit his lip, and tried very hard to resist.

There was only one word to describe the fate of father and son, cruel.

He might have escaped for now, but he couldn't do so forever, one day he will be assassinated.

And Genosuke had to tolerate this as well. Even though he wished for his father's hugs now, but once father and son are separated, Genosuke will slowly forget about his father.

Even though it is painful, there are more things in the world that hurt more than being separated from your own flesh and blood.

"Supreme Commander, are you alright?"

"Hey! Tamiya!"

A series of shouts and footsteps were heard.

The people who ran over are three men dressed like Samurai. The one leading the three people was Karasu Tengu, flapping his wings.

“Karasu Tengu.”

The Supreme Commander was about to ask the identity of these three people, when Shinzaemon called,

“Nakayama, Sanzaki, Oda?”

It looks like Shinzaemon knew these people.

“Why are all of you here...? Have you settled in Edo?”

“That’s right! Three months ago, we started to work in the provincial office of Edo.”

One of them said while panting. The other two nodded in response.

The other province lords have a mansion in Edo. Some Samurai will leave the province that they are based in and work in the province office of Edo.

“Tamiya, we have been very worried about you.”

“I never expected that you would be in Edo...”

The three men said one after another.

“Sorry. I had some trouble...”

Shinzaemon was unable to finish his sentence as he was interrupted by the man in the middle.

“Tamiya, there is no need to apologize, we know about it already. I heard you were caught in the sly ploy of the second in command, Toku, is that so?”

“How did you know about this...?”

“It was *Crow-sama* that told us this. You must have had a hard time, living in anxiety this whole time.”

“Why didn’t you discuss it with us before you left... no! You were already running for your life and did not have time to discuss it with us.”

The three men said, their voices full of hurt. At that moment, Shinzaemon glanced at Karasu Tengu.

Karasu Tengu, floating in the air, gave him a nod.

Since the day before, Karasu Tengu had been investigating the people that had connections with Shinzaemon. During the investigation, he tracked down the Edo office where the three men worked in and told them everything.

After hearing from Karasu Tengu that the Samurai who left his province, Tamiya Shinzaemon is currently in Edo and had ran into some trouble, they had immediately ran to the temple.

However, they did not come simply because they were worried. They had also came to deliver an important message.

“Tamiya, everything is okay now. You don’t have to stay and live in anxiety anymore.”

“That’s right! You can return to your home and continue working there. We have come here to tell you this.”

“What is going on? If I return, I would be found by Toku-sama...”

“He won’t. He has already stepped down, and has no control anymore.”

“Stepped down?”

According to the explanations from the three men, the situation roughly went like this...

After the commander passed away from an illness, Toku, the one who framed Shinzaemon successfully became the core of politics in the province, and controlled all political affairs.

However, Toku’s good days did not last long. The ones who resisted him banded together to influence the leader of the province, forming a citizen’s revolution, which destroyed all who supported Toku.

He might have grown tired of the world falling to the bottom when he was at the top of the power pyramid, so he committed Seppuku, ending his life. His family was also jailed.

“Stepped down... and even committed Seppuku...”

“That’s right! So no one would be after your life now.”

Shinzaemon kept nodding continuously, chewing on what his companions said. Then, he lifted his head suddenly, and asked,

“When did Toku commit Seppuku?”

“I heard it was five days ago. I only knew about it about reading a letter sent from the province.”

“Five days ago...”

Shinzaemon muttered hoarsely, then he looked towards the body of Katakiri Denshirou.

The three men followed Shinzaemon’s line of sight, then their expressions froze and hardened.

“Tamiya, that man is...”

“An assassin, his name is Katakiri Denshirou. He was commanded by Toku to come here and take my life.”

“Is it that Katakiri?” The three men discussed softly amongst themselves.

“But I am in doubt over one matter. Toku had died five days ago, Katakiri should have known about this matter long ago. Mostly likely, he had some way to communicate with the province, and at the latest, he would have received the news by today. Since his employer had stepped down, and even committed Seppuku... then why is Katakiri so insistent on completing his task?”

“Maybe he is driven because of you.”

One of them said.

“It might be because he really wanted to settle things with you...”

“.....”

Shinzaemon seemed to be thinking about the grudges that Katakiri had against him, and he feel silent.

After a long moment of silence, one of the people finally said in a cheerful voice,

“In conclusion, you don’t have to live in fear anymore, go back to your village.”

"That's right! You have a child, it would be so inconvenient staying here."

"You don't have to worry finding a job, our leader in the Edo province office has already arranged it for you."

Shinzaemon only exhaled slowly, and his expression slowly became mellow.

"All of you have always helped me, even when I was lost in the clutches of alcohol, I have always been looked out for..."

Shinzaemon said softly, "I'm thankful to all of you..." and lowered his head. Then he faced the Supreme Commander with a determined expression.

"Nurarihyon-sama... you have heard it as well, I will return to my home."

"Yeah! That's good."

"Yes! So I must make an unreasonable request... can you return Genosuke to me?"

The Supreme Commander pffted and started laughing.

"You know, Shinzaemon... of course I will return the child to you. Since the evil hearted commander who wanted to kill you is not around anymore, the situation is different. Geno will be returned to you."

"Thank you very much!"

"But---"

Seeing that the Supreme Commander had not finished speaking, Shinzaemon, who was about to pick Genosuke up, suddenly stopped moving.

"...Yes?"

"Can you let that woman hold Geno for the last time?"

Saying that, the Supreme Commander looked towards the side building, he had discovered Setsura standing there not long ago.

"That person is...?"

"She is from my clan, she is the nanny who took care of Geno."

"So she is the one who helped take care of Genosuke..."

The Supreme Commander called for Setsura.

"You heard it right? Genosuke is about to leave, come and hold him."

"Hey! Don't get any wrong ideas."

Setsura still had that aggressive look on her face, and said,

"I only came here to remind you of your breakfast, what this brat does is none of my business, I don't care."

"Why are you forcing yourself?"

"I'm not."

"Uh! I beseech you, please hold Genosuke."

“See, even the child’s father is begging you.”

However, even with Shinzaemon’s plea, Setsura did not move.

“Seriously! Why are you being so stubborn!”

The Supreme Commander sighed in frustration, and took Genosuke out from the cart in one swoop.

“Here, Setsura.”

“.....”

“Come.”

“.....”

“Hold him for a bit.”

Then, Setsura finally gave in.

“Sure, I’ll hold him...”

Setsura replied with a pout, and gently took Genosuke from the Supreme Commander.

She called softly, “Geno”. Even though her voice was soft at first, it slowly regained their normal volume.

“Geno, be good Geno. And take care.”

Hearing Setsura’s calls, Genosuke immediately cried out with an “Ah~~ ah~~”, using his finger to pat at Setsura’s cheek.

At this moment, Setsura seemed to come to her senses and she turned her back to the Supreme Commander and Shinzaemon.

After holding the baby for a while more, Setsura turned around and said,

“Go! Geno, go back to your father...”

After saying that, Setsura returned the baby to Shinzaemon. Shinzaemon, who received Genosuke from Setsura, lowered his head as he quietly gave his thanks.

Then, Setsura left the crowd and returned to the side building, and looked at Genosuke at all as she did so.

The group of people said nothing, and the silence was only broken by Genosuke’s soft cries.

Even though the battle had been bloody, the son that had to be separated from his father had been returned to his father’s side, and they could now go home. It looks like that no longer had the need to loiter in this abandoned temple anymore.

At this moment, the Supreme Commander smiled happily,

“Okay! We have nothing to do here, let’s go home! Shinzaemon, Genosuke, take care.”

“Nurarihyon-sama...”

Shinzaemon didn’t even have the chance to say “I would never forget your great kindness”, when he was stopped by a raised hand from the Supreme Commander, then he left the scene with steady strides.

The Supreme Commander pushed the empty cart and was about to leave the temple when he heard Setsura sniffing behind him.

"Setsura, thank you for taking care of Genosuke."

Hearing the Supreme Commander say that, Setsura only replied with a short sentence,

"... it's fine, what's there to thank."

The Supreme Commander returned to the mansion. When he entered his room, he saw that Youhime had already woken up, and playing with Rihan.

When he told Youhime that Shinzaemon and Genosuke could now safely return to their home, Youhime nodded with relief.

"Shinzaemon-san is really lucky, he has such loyal friends."

"That's right! People who keep you company no matter what, friends are really a precious thing."

Then Nurarihyon leaned closer to Rihan, who is in Youhime's arms.

"Rihan, this goes for you as well, when you are hurting or weak, feel free to depend on your comrades, that way, your Nura Clan will grow bigger and bigger."

"Seriously."

Youhime said while smiling.

"What do you mean by Rihan's Nura Clan... Ayakashi-sama is really thinking too far ahead.

"I don't know how far away it will be, but that day will come one day, it will be that time, in the end."

Then the Supreme Commander stood up and opened the paper door.

Sunlight shone brightly into the yard, looks like today would be a fine and sunny day as well.

"Let's go for a walk in the afternoon as well."

The Supreme Commander had only finished talking to himself, when Youhime's voice was heard from inside the room.

"Ayakashi-sama, if you want to go for a walk, I will go with you as well. If I let you go on your own, you might just bring a baby back."

"That... that won't happen again."

The Supreme Commander couldn't hold back a loud laugh.

"But, it's good if you came along. Okay, let's have our long awaited *date!*"

"Sure, Ayakashi-sama!"

Youhime replied excitedly.

END

Story 3 - Yoshiwara Cat's Cradle

Chapter 1

Every evening, Yoshiwara is enveloped in a beautiful commotion.

The sound of prostitutes and geisha playing the likes of shamisen and koto spills out of the brothel's tatami rooms, patrons clapping their hands as they dance to the players' tune.

The oirans' lovely voices are sometimes shrill and the drunken guests' laughter is sometimes boisterous, but even so there is not a frown to be seen. Lovely voices and laughter, things which never fail to add colour to Yoshiwara.

Even so, amidst tonight's Yoshiwara was a clamour of unrest.

Policemen carrying short truncheons and lanterns ran through the throng of guests and prostitutes in pursuit of someone.

The ones they were chasing were a group of thieves who had attacked a rice merchant's treasury about an hour earlier. Having heard that one of the 3-man group had apparently taken refuge in Yoshiwara, the police had returned with truncheons in hand and bloodshot eyes. Without retreating, they persistently searched for the group, shouting gruffly, "Out of the way!", "Step aside!", "Search over there!" and similar sentences, conveying their murderous intent.

——— How troublesome.....

From a 2nd-floor tatami room of that very brothel, a man gazed down at the policemen boorishly plowing their way through the town's chic nightly atmosphere.

That man was the very thief who was being pursued.

He was about 20 years old. Though he appeared composed, there seemed to be a sort of loneliness in his eyes, and his hair was fashioned such that one portion was tied back to trail behind him.

Out of habit, he played with the string in his hands as he sat on the window frame and absently gazed down at the street below.

"It is rather noisy outside, isn't it."

The oiran in the room spoke to him.

Her name was Shiragiku. She was the highest-ranked oiran in the brothel, and this room was for her personal use. The brothel was called "Akizukiya". Speaking of Shiragiku of Akizukiya, she was such a famous and popular prostitute that there was no end of the wealthy merchants who would buy her out of bondage.

"Where did you go tonight?"

Shiragiku asked.

She was well aware that the man was a thief. Naturally, she also knew that the people below were in pursuit of him.

"I entered the mansion of Oikura Town's rice store, Hagiya, and distributed all of the money in the treasury to the townspeople."

The man answered while still looking out the window. There was no sense of great interest in his tone, giving the feeling of an indifferent report on events already ended.

Shiragiku, who seemed to know this rice store, said,

"Ah, I heard that last month and the month before that, the landlord there reserved Aoi-Tei (a restaurant). He seems to have a great amount of influence..."

"It's dirty money."

The man spoke quietly but decisively.

"That guy's in the business of taking advantage of the common people. Sinners must be judged..."

"You are a sinner."

Shiragiku spoke, moving closer to him.

"How long will it be until you are beheaded? Just thinking about it causes a pang in my chest..."

Just being near that clear voice and those teary eyes was stiflingly pitiful.

It ruffled him a little, but he suppressed it and continued.

"Don't worry. Even if I'm caught, I'm doing this for the sake of justice. No matter the verdict, there's no need to be afraid."

Seeing as he entered other people's treasuries and took money from them, the man was undeniably a thief.

However, not once had he ever stolen money for his personal desires. He always dumped the money he stole at the houses of the town's poor.

In other words, he was a chivalrous thief. Though he had never labelled himself as such, that was how the common people saw him.

Before breaking into a treasury, a careful investigation was carried out. The ones targeted were corrupt merchants who earned a hefty sum from shady dealings and hadn't been exposed by a thorough government investigation.

There was one more restriction. "Killing and then robbing them" was not allowed.

The jobs were carried out together with two associates.

In order to sneak into a treasury, they would put the guards to sleep or knock them unconscious or sometimes, if things got a bit rough, they'd break a guard's leg, but they never took anyone's life. Of course, they went through all of that because the man and his associates had the skills to exclusively carry out their goals. Because they performed their jobs in such a manner, they were seen as chivalrous thieves.

They had been targeting Hagiya's treasury for quite some time.

Hagiya was the leading rice store in Oikura Town, but lately the business had expanded into moneylending as a loanshark. They were merciless when it came to collecting debts, having no qualms about stripping away a sick person's futon.

Also, due to his being a merchant, his dealings with transporting goods overseas led him to develop close ties with small ships that sold cargo. Joining forces with them, he utilized smuggled goods to gain illegitimate profits, and this also came up during the investigation.

When the trio snuck into Hagiya's treasury, it was piled high with an abundance of money, just as they had thought. It was as if they could hear the common people's moans from beneath the piled-up money.

They took all of that money and scattered it among the townspeople.

But the man knew that, to Hagiya, the money stolen this evening was just the tip of an iceberg, and did little damage to Hagiya.

So, without a doubt, the punishment imposed would not end tonight, but would rather only just begin.

I'll wait till the excitement had died down before I strike Hagiya again, the man thought.

Chapter 2

The main gate of Yoshiwara closes at ten o'clock at night.

Until the wooden clasps sound at 12 midnight signalling the closing time, the side door will always be open. If anyone passes through that area at that time, he will attract a lot of attention.

So if the man was not planning to stay the night with Shiragiku, he would have to leave Yoshiwara before the main door closes.

"I'm going."

After saying this short sentence, the man stood up, planning to leave. Shiragiku did not have any intentions to make him stay. After many stops, the two of them had established a silent agreement.

"Come again when you have the time."

Shiragiku said from behind, with the special tone of voice that only ladies from the brothel would possess. As the man was about to leave amongst her melodious voice of silver bells, Kino, who is working in the brothel as a "Kamuro", suddenly showed her face from the edges of the paper door.

"Kamuro" refers to young girls who live in the brothel to help the prostitutes by doing odd jobs. Beautiful Kamuro would need to learn skills like playing the Shamisen, singing and dancing and so on to prepare for their future as prostitutes.

That is Kino's situation. Shiragiku had commented that it was about time for her to learn some performing arts.

That's right, even though Kino is still young, but she had an attractive and striking appearance. However, Kino is still a child and the top of her head had not even reached the man's chest.

"Oh! It's been a while, little girl."

Hearing the man address her in that manner, Kino looked unhappy.

"I'm not a little girl anymore! I'm already nine years old."

Even though her voice is still child-like, and her manner of speaking is that of a prostitute, she was able to effectively portray her unhappiness.

The man laughed loudly, patted Kino on the head, and left the room after saying "See you later."

In order to avoid the eyes of the policemen, the man left through the back door of the brothel.

The man couldn't help but think to himself that time really flies, and that one year had already passed since that incident. When he first met Kino, she was eight years old.

Walking through the crowd of drunken people in the street, he thought about what happened one year ago.

One year ago, the man took his first step into Yoshiwara. That night, he was being chased just like today. Even though he had broken into the treasury with his associates as well, their methods were still unpolished, and a huge commotion was caused when they ran to the brothel.

Still a rookie at that time, the man was chased with his pursuers so close to him that they could almost hear each other's breathing.

Even if they had tried to *lose their pursuers*, but the policemen were relentless, with angry shouts and the stomping of feet coming from their surroundings.

The three thieves felt that it would be difficult to escape if they stayed together, so they split up to escape on their own.

The reason why the man would escape to Yoshiwara was because he remembered that before one of his associates, who he had just split up from, joined the thieving occupation, he had been a performer. This associate could easily change his appearance and had the skill to change his voice at will as well, so he had performed at Yoshiwara for some time.

To this associate of his, Yoshiwara is his territory, so he would not take refuge here. But to the man, this is his first time, and no one would be able to recognise him, so he had decided to escape to this place.

After walking through the gates of Yoshiwara, the man was stunned by the scene he was in front of him.

Customers looking for such services and prostitutes were making merry, with music continuously playing in the background, making people feel that they are in an ink painting, without knowing that night has fallen. Lights were lit throughout the city, and filled with an obviously sexual atmosphere. Being his first time seeing such a place where night doesn't seem to exist, the man was really surprised.

Just as the man stood in a dazed manner on Nakamura Main Street, which cut through the middle of Yoshiwara, he heard the shouts and footsteps of the policemen behind him.

If he did not act soon, he will be caught. The man ran aimlessly with all his might, turning into the first alleyway he saw.

He stooped down next to the back door of a building that seemed like a brothel and held his breath.

I might be able to avoid everything if I hid here, the man prayed to himself. However, this way of thinking was too naïve. After going through that process where he had to run for his life, he should know how difficult it is to get away from these policemen. Now nearby, the policemen had started to lift up the drainage covers.

The man thought he could act as one of the customers and hide inside the brothel, but he had no knowledge of the rules of Yoshiwara, even if he wanted to act, it wouldn't be convincing at all.

He had run to Yoshiwara without thinking it through properly, the man started to berate himself for being so careless.

“What’s wrong?”

Hearing a voice from behind him, the man turned his head sharply, and saw a little girl standing in front of him.

That girl would be the prostitute-in-training Kino. She had a small toy sandbag in her hand, and seemed to be playing by herself.

“You look pale, are you unwell?”

“...”

The man did not know how to reply, and hesitated for a while. Should he ask her to leave?

At that moment, voices of the policemen could be heard from outside the alley.

“Hey! Search around here!”

“Yes!”

The policemen seemed to have noticed this alley. Their footsteps approached. It might be because the man’s face showed anxiety; Kino sensed this and asked,

“Are you hiding from people?”

The girl seemed unused to the tone of voice used by prostitutes, her voice still contained a country accent.

At that moment, the man did not know if he should admit such a thing, but he still nodded slightly.

“Come with me.”

After saying that, Kino took the man’s hand and pulled him along. Under the guidance of that small hand, the man entered the brothel.

“Let’s go to my older sister’s room.”

Kino said as she broke into a small run in the corridor. When he met prostitutes who are looking for customers, the man avoided them by turning his head.

After turning a few corners in the corridors, Kino finally stopped in front of what she called her older sister’s room, and opened the paper door. Seeing Kino suddenly run into the room, the oiran who was sitting in front of the mirror, started to chide,

“Kino, you can’t do that. Say something before opening the door, understand?”

The oiran was holding a long pipe, and the room was filled with white smoke. Just as she moved her pipe above the fireplace, intending to get rid of the ashes, she noticed the man standing next to Kino.

As the man’s gaze met that of the oiran, he momentarily stopped breathing.

He forgot that he is a thief, and that he was being chased, being attracted solely by the appearance of the woman in front of him.

This oiran is Shiragiku.

Shiragiku seemed to have forgotten to breathe as well, staring at the man. In the end, it was Shiragiku who recovered first.

“May I know who you are? Did you enter the wrong room?”

“No... that’s not it...”

The man finally said after finding his voice, like he couldn’t differentiate between fantasy and reality.

“This man seemed to be chased by some officials, and was hiding at our back door.”

Kino said, joining the conversation.

“Ah! Chased by officials? Such trouble.”

Shiragiku said as her eyes widened slightly. It might be that she had experienced many situations at work, so her expression did not show as much surprise as her tone of voice.

“Did you do something bad, mister?”

Faced with such a direct question, the man did not know how to answer it. Seeing the state he was in, Shiragiku smiled.

“Hee hee, it seems like I have become an official at the police headquarters. Fine, it’s alright if you do not wish to answer.”

“... I’ve stolen money from someone else’s treasury.”

The man said softly.

“The man is a corrupt merchant, I distributed the money to the poor.”

“Oh! So you’re a chivalrous thief.”

“A thief is a thief, so I am now a sinner.”

“Ah, this Sir is really hard to please.”

Shiragiku said with a giggle.

Whether it’s a shocked expression or smile, or even the expression when she chided Kino, Shiragiku’s voice and laugh were beautiful. Was it because of her Oiran status, or because of her beauty that made her attractive, the man kept pondering this question in confusion, but he could not find an answer.

“Okay! I know the situation now. Thief-san, you can spend the night here.”

“Hide here? But that way...”

“You don’t have to worry, sir. This is my changing room, no one will come in.”

If he could hide here till morning, it would be a big favour to the man. No matter what the policemen did, they would not search a prostitute’s room. It’s just that, why is she so willing to help? The man started to form some doubts.

“Why are you helping me?”

The man asked.

“That’s right, why is that...”

Shiragiku showed a very womanly smile.

“It might be because I do not like those officials, and I did it on the spur of the moment.”

Shiragiku said as she kept her long pipe, and called for Kino.

“Kino, keep Thief-san company, look for me if anything happens, understand?”

“Okay, big sister.”

Kino replied spiritedly.

“Now then Thief-san, I will be meeting my customers now. When it’s daylight, please walk out of here with your head held high.”

Shiragiku walked past the man, and reached for the paper door. Seeing her hand, the man suddenly had the urge to grab her jade like hands and pull her into an embrace. However, he resisted such an urge and asked,

“Miss Oiran, can you tell me your name?”

“My name is Shiragiku.”

“Shiragiku...”

“Everyone joked that my name is too common, and sounded like it is the name of a marketplace.”

“How can that be, it’s nothing like that.”

For unknown reasons, even for a simple sentence like that, the man’s voice was strong and firm.

Shiragiku wanted to ask the man’s name as well, but abandoned the idea.

“Forget it, I’ll just address you as ‘Thief-san’.”

Saying that, Shiragiku smiled once more, then pushing open the paper door, she left the room. She was no longer in the room, and only the smell of herbs remained---

That was what happened during the encounter between the man and Shiragiku one year ago.

After that, the man went to Akizukiya frequently, and always asked for Shiragiku.

At that time, why did Shiragiku help him?

Up till now, the man did been unable to obtain an answer beyond “it was a spur of the moment”. However, after many conversations, the man had thought of a few possibilities.

Shiragiku was born into a poor family, and her parents owed a huge debt. In order to pay off that debt, Shiragiku had no choice but to go to Yoshiwara, thus plunging into the cruel seas of the prostitution trade.

And chivalrous thieves will distribute the wealth to the poor to help them, and were the saviours of the poor people.

Shiragiku might have helped to hide him because of this reason. In addition, it doesn’t look like she has any ulterior motives, and had never requested for the man to pay of the debts of her parents.

If the chivalrous thieves could get away from everything, then many more poor people would receive help. Shiragiku had been thinking that way, which is why she lent a hand.

Considerate, kind, Shiragiku was that sort of woman.

Shiragiku wasn't just beautiful in appearance, her personality was magnanimous as well. Just talking to her would calm him down.

Undisputedly, the man had already reached a conclusion in his heart.

He is in love with Shiragiku, and he is very sure of it.

It wasn't a love that was cultivated over time. When he first set eyes on Shiragiku in the changing room one year ago, he had fallen in love with this woman.

And Shiragiku, had also fallen in love with the man.

---When I do not see you, I feel lifeless. I really wish I am able to see you every single night.....

Other people might say that they were the most effective sweet words that an oiran can use. But to the man, whether it was just sweet talk or not, it wasn't important to him at all.

A lady named Shiragiku fell in love with him at first sight. As long as this feeling exists, any other matters are unimportant, and there was no need to care about them.

The man never knew that he could fall so deeply in love with someone before this. That was how deep his feelings for Shiragiku were.

Before this, infiltrating into the treasury of black hearted merchants, stealing their wealth, and distributing them to the poor. As long as he could do that, he will no longer have any regrets in life. Even if he was caught and killed, he will not have any complaints.

But, currently, the man's heart has changed.

Death is not scary at all. But after he is dead, he will no longer be able to see Shiragiku; this fear had deeply rooted itself in his heart.

He might be able to buy her out of bondage, so she would belong only to him, he had thought about this idiotic idea before.

However, the man did not possess that sort of wealth, the money he stole had all gone to other people.

If he used the stolen money to buy Shiragiku, he would be able to take her as his wife. But doing so would be going against the morals of humans, and he would fall to the deepest depths of Hell.

As long as he is able to see Shiragiku occasionally, it will be enough. He would see Shiragiku, leave after regaining the calmness in his heart, then move into action towards his next target.

Once, the man had given a cheap hairpin to Shiragiku. To a high class prostitute, this hairpin would be too simple and cheap, but when Shiragiku received the gift, she was very happy.

---Thief-san, thank you.

That's right! He would just remain as "Thief-san". The next day, I would still be a thief.

He is a nameless thief who drifted from his hometown of Josu (around the Ibaraki Prefecture) to Edo. The man will continue to uphold this identity until the day he dies.

The man passed through the gates of Yoshiwara, and pulling the string out from the front of his shirt, he played with it while walking through the night streets.

At around the same time---

The boss of Hagiya, Ribeï, was gritting his teeth angrily in the treasury.

There were no valuables left in the treasury. The piles of gold were all stolen in one night, and not one gold coin remained.

Even though he had hired people to keep watch all day and night in shifts, all his guards had passed out, and were tied up in the courtyard. Seeing the unique tying style on the rope, Ribeï knew who the culprits were immediately.

The people who stole the money were the trio of chivalrous thieves who have generated much talk recently. From the officials he knew well, he learnt that the leader of the chivalrous thieves has godly string manipulating technique, and uses a unique tying style when he ties the guards up.

"This nonsense about chivalrous thieves...they are just a group of petty criminals!"

Inside the treasury, a wave of black anger rose inside Ribeï.

Even though the treasures that were stolen consisted of only a small portion of the total, once he thought about the amount of time and effort that had been needed to gather that amount of money, Ribeï felt an uncontrollable surge of anger. However, Hagiya was not that weak, and that amount of money would not affect his business at all. Besides this treasury, Hagiya contained many more treasuries just like it.

However, even if his business operations were not affected, it still caused a huge problem for his pride. After being ridiculed in such a way, he couldn't just let this matter go.

Ribeï had a personal principle in life, and that is "Money is blood."

If the treasury in Hagiya is compared to a large living creature, then gold is the creature's blood. In order to keep the creature alive, he would need to continuously inject fresh blood.

If the blood ran itself dry and the treasury becomes parched, his business will be doomed. So Ribeï kept accumulating fresh blood to give to the treasury. That is what operating a business is like.

Tonight, the bandits had stolen the blood needed for the business, without leaving a single drop behind.

---If so, I want all of you to pay with your blood...

"Find those thieves and kill them!"

Ribeï order the manager standing beside him.

"Flush out that string manipulating leader, as well as his underlings, then kill them all... No! You might as well capture them alive, and bring them to me, I wish to see them die before me!"

"Understood!" The manager replied, nodding. Just then, Ribeï added,

"Also, get rid of the guards who were on duty tonight."

Chapter 3

Infiltrating the treasury of black hearted merchants, stealing the money, then distributing it to the poor. For this kind of job, there does not seem to have an end.

Even though all the money had been given away, but the poor people will not disappear just like that, and in addition, they cannot do this every day. As long as one merchant has fallen victim, the other merchants will be on their guard, so they need to wait for a period of time before they can strike again.

One night three months after the infiltration of Hagiya's treasury, the man met up with his two accomplices once more.

The meeting place was the longhouse where one of them lived in. Around 9pm, all the chivalrous thieves have gathered.

The three of them were going to carry out their mission tonight. Their target is Hougetsuya, which was a shipping business. Even though this is the first time they had targeted Hougetsuya, the three of them had already investigated the place.

"This time is Hougetsuya, huh. Even though its scale is not as large as Hagiya, but it is unmistakable that they have taken part in shady deals. Let's steal all that it has, and do a spectacular job!"

One of the comrades leaning against the wall said. He had rounder eyes, and a young looking face, but in fact was four to five years older than the man.

The name of this comrade is Seisuke, who used to be a performer. He had seen many evil merchants who flaunt their wealth for enjoyment in the brothels of Yoshiwara, and he hated and felt repulsed by their behavior, thus choosing this path of being a chivalrous thief.

Normally, Seisuke would just have a normal baby-like face. However, he is able to change into various appearances, and change his voice. When he was still performing, Seisuke was able to elicit much laughter using those antics, and now it is the best tool for sneaking around.

"There might be traps in the treasury. Kichijiro, I'll leave it to you at that time."

The man said as he turned to his other comrade.

This longhouse was the dwelling of the man called Kichijiro.

"Okay."

Kichijiro only replied simply with one word, nodding. This person had a huge stature. Even when he sat down cross legged, he still looked like a mountain. During the day, Kichijiro is a carpenter. The brute strength which he developed while working and the knowledge of the housing structure of their target have also become an effective weapon in this situation.

The more wary merchants would set traps in the mansion or treasury. Kichijiro is able to recognize and disable the traps. He is able to deduce the position of the traps from various clues such as the way the floorboards rub against one another.

Compared to the more cheerful and talkative Seisuke, Kichijiro keeps more to himself. However, there was one rare chance where he spoke about his background. A few years ago, his mother came down with a serious illness, but he had lost her because he was unable to gather the money for her treatment. He had chosen to become a chivalrous thief because of this.

Ex-performer Seisuke, carpenter Kichijiro and the man skilled with strings were working independently of each other at first. Afterwards, they coincidentally bumped into each other at the same rice store treasury, and the three of them decided to form a group since they had the same goal. They had worked together since.

Even though the man was named the leader, but they are equals, not like the triad gangs which have clearly defined statuses.

“Time to move.”

After saying that, the man stood up. When they meet up, the three chivalrous thieves do not have to go over and confirm the details of their tasks. To the three people who have infiltrated countless treasuries, the tactics to use have been deeply ingrained in their minds.

After leaving the longhouse, they reached their target in less than half an hour.

In the darkness of the night, Hougetsuya’s mansion and treasury were housed within four walls.

Standing in front of these walls, the three men exchange glances and nodded. That was their signal to start the operation.

If the walls are tall, they can use rope or stand on Kichijiro’s shoulders to climb over, but it seems like there is no need to do so for this wall. With a leap, they cleared the wall easily.

After passing through the mansion were following the borders of the yard, they ended up near the treasury.

There were police officers holding batons standing guard on both sides of the treasury door, and even from this far away, anyone could have seen that the guards are listless, hearing their yawns.

“It looks like we can handle them easily. I’m going to divert their attention, and then we’ll act as per usual.”

Seisuke said. The final briefing before starting the mission was completed in just these few sentences.

Following that, the three people advanced while, keeping to the walls of the mansion, then ran to the opposite side of the yard, behind the treasury.

They moved steadily towards the front of the treasury for a while, and stopped before they turned the corner. The police officer who was constantly yawning was just around the corner.

At that time, Seisuke called out in a woman’s voice.

“Excuse me... is anyone around...?”

Seisuke’s voice was very sweet and charming, completely different from his original voice. Hearing this voice in the darkness, anyone would think it belonged to a young lady, instead of a rough man.

Attracted by the voice, the police guard walked over, baton in hand.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

Seisuke replied in a woman’s voice.

“My body feels uncomfortable... can you help me pat my back?”

“Help you pat your back?”

Just as the police guard was about to approach the crouching Seisuke, Kichijiro snuck behind the police guard, and clamped his thick arms around the guard’s neck.

Then, with a hard twist, the guard fell unconscious. The man pulled out his strings and tied up the guard with his unique knots. His tying method is like the signature of the trio of thieves.

After taking the key from the guard, the three men opened the door of the treasury.

Kichijiro, who was at the front of the group, did not enter immediately. He inspected the floors carefully to make sure that there were no traps.

“Be careful not to step on that plank, the other areas are safe.”

After looking towards the plank which Kichijiro had pointed out, the other two nodded. After entering the treasury, Kichijiro once again quickly inspected the walls and ceiling, and after confirming that there are no traps, the three of them then walked towards the place where the valuables were located.

Besides money, there were other expensive looking hanging scrolls and antiques on the shelves, but they were not interested in those at all, and were only interested in searching for the coins.

The three men quickly threw the coins into a square cloth that was about the size of a futon. Very quickly, the gold in the treasury were picked clean and split into three bags. Then the three men left the treasury with one bag each.

Flipping over the wall, and running about one street (about 110 meters) to the darkness of an assembly hall, the three men finally couldn't hold in their laughter.

“It's really smooth sailing this time.”

The man said as he adjusted the rope across his chest. Seisuke also replied as he touched his nose,

“Of course it'll be smooth sailing, we are the skilled trio of chivalrous thieves after all!”

Then Seisuke shifted his body, adjusting the cloth bag on his bag and said,

“But we only got three bags this time, if this was Hagiya, we would still need to make two more trips.”

“That's true, but there is a method to carry all of Hagiya's gold in one trip.”

“All the gold in one trip? How?”

“It's simple. You and me carry one bag each, and we pass the rest to *Ki-chan*.”

Hearing the man's joke, Seisuke laughed loudly.

“Hahaha, that's really a great idea!”

“Stop this nonsense.”

Kichijiro finally spoke.

“Even if I do become stronger, I won't be able to carry that much, I'm not a monster.”

“No no no, your brute strength is already on par with that of a monster. Why don't you try it now, take my bag... heavy! Someone help me with this ~~”

“Seisuke, I can help you carry the gold, and I could carry you at the same time. But after that, you can just look forward to ending up in a river.”

Kichijiro also cracked a rare joke. It might be because the mission went really well, so he was in really high spirits.

“Okay, it's time to get rid of our burden.”

Seisuke said jokingly. After stealing, distributing comes next.

When they reached the nearby longhouse, due to the late hour, there wasn't any smoke rising from the chimneys at all. All the inhabitants have all snuffed out their lights, and the surroundings were quiet.

They pulled out gold coins from the bag on their backs, and casually threw it through the windows in each unit. The clear sound of the coins flying through the air signified the even distribution of the unbalanced income gap.

The sounds of coins hitting the floor could be heard, then came the surprised shouts of the inhabitants of the longhouse.

“Why is there money here?”, “Wah! Gold coins!”, “The chivalrous thieves have appeared!”, “Chivalrous thief-sama!”, “Don’t go back to sleep! Look at this money!”, ---The lights in many units lit up, and waves of frantic footsteps were heard.

When the ruckus hit the highest point, the three chivalrous thieves were no longer at the longhouse, but on the roof of a building some distance away, stowing away the empty cloth.

Three bags of coins were given away in such a short time. The only time they can relax is when they are collecting their thoughts on the roof. However, they cannot remain in such a state for too long.

The scene at the longhouse will soon reach the ears of the night patrols and watch guards. This street will soon be swarming with policemen.

Which meant, after stealing the valuables and distributing them to the citizens, they still had another task waiting for them; escape.

“Found them! Over there!”

The voices of the policemen were heard from a nearby alley. From the sound, the curved weapon waving policemen were currently rushing over with their underlings.

“Heh, there’s seems to be more people compared to before, huh.”

Seisuke said in a relaxed and interested manner.

“They’re just an unorganized group of people. Let’s go.”

The three of them took it as a signal and started running across the roof.

In the alley below, the policemen, chased after them, a few hundred meters behind, while shouting things like “Stop!”, “Don’t run!”. But no thief in the world will listen to those words anyway, so shouting them is useless.

They ran across the rooftops of a few buildings, and after an unknown amount of time, Seisuke’s voice was heard, along with the clattering of the tiles under his feet.

“Hey! Let’s get down from here! It’s about time we set *that* up.”

“I know.”

After the man nodded at Seisuke, he jumped into the alley below, the time to set the trap had come.

Seisuke and Kichijiro followed, jumping down as well.

Seeing the three thieves jump down together, the expressions on the policemen’s faces changed drastically.

“They’ve come down!”, “Don’t let them get away!”, the sounds of these angry shouts were heard amongst the commotion.

The man pulled out black string from the front of his clothes, and stayed where he was. Kichijiro and Seisuke, on the other hand, ran past the man, leaving the area.

He stood alone in the middle of the path, like he was welcoming the policemen. The man did this intentionally.

“The thief has stopped!”, “Give yourself up!”----Hearing these words, the man couldn’t help but smile.

---The ones who should give up are all of you.

He thought to himself.

The policemen rushed forward, taking up the space of the whole street. When the two parties were about to make contact, the man suddenly ran away.

He ran into the closest alleyway, and quickly stretched out a string near the ground. The string was pulled out at around ankle height, but because it was black, for most people, it will be difficult to spot.

At that moment, the policeman leading the way rushed in to the alley, and the result was that he was perfectly tripped by the string. Slowly, moans were also heard from the people behind him as all of them face planted one by one. The man gave a small smile at the pile of policemen, and continued to run through the alley.

However, the policemen did not give up so easily. The ones who were at the back of the group stepped past the wall of their comrades and continued the chase while yelling angrily.

The man ran into another alley. However, he did not set a trap this time, but ran straight for the other end of the alley. The policemen who entered the alleyway at a later time suddenly became more careful at this point, suspecting that there will be a trap here as well, and slowed down because of this. Therefore, the man made use of the time he gained to set up another trap with his string at the end of the alley.

The policemen slowly exited the alley, with all of them looking wary. However, in this span of time, the man had already climbed onto the roof of the houses in the street.

As the last policemen left the alley, and everyone was gathered at the exit, the man on the roof pulled the string, activating the trap.

The trap was a large net. After pulling the string, the circular rope will tighten, fastening itself around the bodies of the policemen.

The man held onto the other hand of the string, pulling it a little tighter. Just then, Seisuke and Kichijiro appeared on the left and right sides of the man.

“The way you handle string is really amazing. This is called catching everything in one net...No! It should be catching everything with *string*.”

Hearing Seisuke say that, the three people laughed.

Chapter 4

Kino, a prostitute-in-training, had eavesdropped on the conversations between Shiragiku and “Thief-san” before.

Even though she knew very well that she would get scolded if she was discovered, and knew that eavesdropping was a bad thing to do, she couldn’t resist moving close to the paper door, pricking up her ears to listen to the sounds inside.

If it was the other customers, Kino would definitely not do such a thing. She would only eavesdrop if “Thief-san” appeared.

With regards to “Thief-san”, Kino had always harboured strong feelings for him which she couldn’t deny.

But to Kino, eavesdropping was another kind of hardship. From the words that she could hear through the paper door, Kino could feel it. The man and woman on the other side of the door had a very deep relationship, which far surpassed the normal relationship between a customer and a prostitute.

This reality was like a stab in the heart to her.

Shiragiku and “Thief-san” shared the same feelings for each other, and were happy together. In contrast, Kino only felt a great deal of pain.

Sometimes, she even hated Shiragiku’s existence.

Kino was already aware that what she felt was jealousy. But she couldn’t do anything about it, and didn’t know what she could do to ease those feelings.

She didn’t know who mentioned it before, that Oirans would cut their hair and give it to the man they love, to show their devotion.

---Your hair will grow out immediately after being cut, it really grows fast.

The owner of the brothel once said. At that time, a worker who was in charge of attracting customers happened to be passing by, and after hearing that, the worker said,

---Kino, did you know? I heard that women with a lot of hair...

The content seemed to be rather obscene, so the worker was scolded by the owner once that was said.

Should I give my hair to “Thief-san”? Would he accept it? Kino thought to herself.

Low voices were continuously heard from the other side of the paper door.

Standing next to the paper door, Kino kept stroking her hair softly.

Chapter 5

“What? In Yoshiwara?”

Ribei turned his eyes quickly. This place is the residence of the Hagiya mansion.

The manager who delivered the news nodded his head quietly.

“Even though the visits aren’t regular, it seems like he will go there when he feels like it, probably two or three times a month.”

“Hmph! That bastard, actually using other people’s money to play with women!”

Ribei criticised vehemently, and after that, he suddenly remembered that he had heard about the thief who manipulated strings escaping towards Yoshiwara before.

Maybe the man had an Oiran whom he knew well there, and discovered the joy of visiting brothels when he was escaping. Even though he did not know the exact reason, but he had already grasped some clues.

“Then, which brothel is it? What is the name of the Oiran he likes?”

“I have not gotten hold of such information... the person who was doing the tracking was shaken off once he entered the gate.”

Ribei cursed softly, clearly displeased with such a result. The man beside him, who had his hair in a ponytail, tried to appease him, saying,

“Don’t rush it. Since they could find out such information, it shows that we are close. As long as we continue to observe, we’ll be able to flush him out.”

His tone was even and calm, his mouth lifted in a slight smile, and it looked like he had a placid personality. But this ponytailed man is actually an assassin. He was employed with Hagiya two months ago, and is currently working as a bodyguard.

That time, he had personally recommended himself to Hagiya, saying that as long as he was employed, he would be able to increase the strength of Hagiya’s forces.

Of course, the man was very skilled with the sword. When he came to Hagiya to recommend himself, Riberi sent some young people who were rather skilled with the sword to test him, and that man had defeated them in an instant, which proved his great skill.

In addition, other than his mastery with the sword, he also had a bright mind.

In their conversations, the man will suddenly say some surprising things. He knew how to go with the flow, and how to benefit from any situation, a greedy personality.

Letting such a smart person be in charge of just fighting would be such a waste. So Riberi decided to rope him in as a strategist, and called him “Teacher”.

Not rushing to capture the thief who manipulated strings, but deploying people to track and gather information, was also an idea from this man.

If you wish to trap the enemy, you must find his weakness first, then you will succeed. That was the man’s idea.

The ponytailed man nodded silently, and continued,

“It’s best if you sent a few men to watch the gate of Yoshiwara, but do not send a lot of people, just one or two would do. Also, extend the watch time to daytime. Even though they might still be shaken off, but it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared, we have to try everything.”

“Teacher has a point.”

Riberi nodded then pointed his chin towards his manager.

“Go prepare, quickly.”

“Understood,” the manager answered, and left the room.

“If we successfully capture the thief who manipulates strings, at that time, I will leave it to Teacher’s *underlings*.”

Riberi pointed towards the swords carried by the man.

The ponytailed man just smiled and shook his head.

“No, Riberi-san.”

Riberi allowed the man to address him in this manner.

“At that time, it will not be the time for my swords to be used, you should handle this, then you’ll be able to torture the thief to your heart’s content.”

“Heh! I’m looking forward to it.”

In the dimness of the room, Riberi’s suppressed laughter was heard.

After all, it was the third time. In these three years, the thief who manipulated strings had broken in three times. Even the people who worked in the same business as him started to joke that he had started a charity.

---Killing you with one stroke of the sword would be letting you off too easily, just you wait.....

Ribei vowed to himself.

Chapter 6

The chivalrous thief stopped in front of the bookstore. Amongst the many Ukiyoe (woodblock) prints lined up together with the picture novels, there was one which caught his eye.

In the Ukiyoe prints with famous prostitutes as the subject, there was also a picture of Shiragiku. Most of these Ukiyoe prints were group pictures made up of a few prostitutes, but only Shiragiku had an individual picture. It was easy to see Shiragiku's status and level of fame from this.

These pictures weren't expensive at all. So the man bought a Ukiyoe print of Shiragiku and tucked it inside his clothes.

Shiragiku, whom he loved, was not a woman he could see every day. Even though a picture could not replace the actual person, looking at it would stop him from missing her too much. I really bought something good, he thought.

However, the man had no idea of what had happened afterwards.

After the man left the store, another customer entered the shop immediately. This person is a young man, and looked like a merchant. He looked for a worker in the store and asked after the picture bought by the customer before him.

The worker pointed towards the picture labelled "Shiragiku from Akizukiya", answering his question.

Therefore, the man who asked for the information also bought the picture, and left the bookstore immediately, an evil smile on his face.

That man was an underling from Hagiya, he had been following the chivalrous thief.

---The woman whom the string manipulating thief doesn't mind spending large amounts of money on is Shiragiku from Akizukiya.

The underling immediately reported this to his master Ribei and the bodyguard.

"Shiragiku is the most famous Oiran in Yoshiwara! That bastard, not even thinking about his own status..."

Ribei said angrily. At that moment, the ponytailed man calmly crafted out a plan.

"Fine. We will do as Teacher says."

After nodding, Ribei started on the preparations immediately.

Once the shops started opening at night in Yoshiwara, Ribei sent his manager to Yoshiwara to ask for Shiragiku's services. Of course, the manager did not declare his identity.

The manager drank with Shiragiku while making small talk. At first, the two of them talked about normal topics. From the conversations, the manager found out that Shiragiku's parents are still alive and well, and she had a younger brother who is still quite small.

Afterwards, after making sure that the Kamuro and the performers have left the room next door, such that there wasn't anyone who might listen in, the manager, who knew about Shiragiku's family, revealed his true colours.

“Oiran, I know that you are colluding with the thief who manipulates strings. From now on, do as I say, or else I would kill your whole family.”

At that moment, Shiragiku knew that she had been tricked, and she stiffened. She rejected the manager determinedly, and it seemed like she has strong feelings for the chivalrous thief.

However, the manager continued with his threats, telling Shiragiku that Hagiya can kill off her whole family, and even bribe the authorities, so that they would not pursue the matter. Hearing these words, Shiragiku finally gave in.

“But I do not know when Thief-san would come. He would always come without warning...”

“That’s doesn’t matter. We were at a loss before because we do not know who his target was. However, since we know that it is you now, then it is simple. When that guy comes to find you again, just continue giving him wine. Then look for someone to pass the news, a Kamuro or a young person who does odd jobs is fine, just look for someone to let us know. I will send people to stand guard behind the brothel---”

After the manager gave the instructions in a flat voice, he added one last sentence,

“Oiran, you don’t need me to tell you this, but this must be kept a secret. If I find out that you have leaked something out, your family would die, understand?”

Chapter 7

“What’s with you tonight? Why do you keep offering me wine?”

Seeing Shiragiku holding a wine bottle while sitting at his side, the chivalrous thief gave a troubled smile.

This is a guest room in Akizakiya. The time was around 8pm at night.

It has already been ten months since he last infiltrated Hagiya’s treasury. During this time, the man had broken into the treasuries of other businesses. But after doing some calculations, it should be around the right time to strike again. Before this, he had been talking to Shiragiku about this topic.

However, Shiragiku seemed very distracted in the beginning. It was as if something had stolen her attention.

What was even stranger was that even though Shiragiku was distracted, as long as the man emptied the wine in his cup, she would quickly refill it with more wine. Shiragiku, who had always took her time with this, was acting too strangely tonight.

“Hee hee... tonight, I will not allow Thief-san to go home without getting completely drunk first...”

Shiragiku said languidly, gazing at the man flirtatiously, looking extremely attractive and tempting. The man could feel his heart beating furiously in his chest.

“I think you’re the one who’s already drunk though”

“Oh? Is that so?”

Hee hee hee, Shiragiku laughed. Then she leaned towards him.

Faced with such a sudden movement, the man became flustered, and his knee hit the table, causing the wine bottle to fall to the floor.

Clang, after the sharp sound was heard in the room, it suddenly became totally quiet.

Shiragiku was leaning into the man’s chest completely.

“Shiragiku...?”

“Thief-san...”

The man wanted to say something, but the words were stuck in his throat.

Shiragiku was definitely acting strange tonight.

The man wanted to ask what had happened, but it felt like his throat was blocked, and he wasn't able to make any sound at all.

The Shiragiku leaning against his chest was real and warm, and even though a layer of clothes separated them, he could feel the softness of her body very well.

The next moment, the man grasped Shiragiku's shoulders. He slowly moved his face closer to Shiragiku, and at that time, the scene he saw gave him a shock.

She was crying. The Shiragiku at this moment was not a drunk Oiran, but a weak woman who could not stop crying.

“Shiragiku, what happened?”

The man's tone was very calm, his feelings regaining their serenity.

But Shiragiku only shook her head, and said,

“Thief-san, please leave quickly... run...”

The manager of Hagiya led the way, followed by the ponytailed man and another young underling. Rabei did not come along, but waited for news at home.

The three men walked hurriedly along the corridors of the brothel, reaching Shiragiku's room. The manager said, “After you, Teacher.” and moved away from his spot in front of the door for the ponytailed man to pass.

The ponytailed man placed his hand on the paper door, and opened the door in a single movement.

There wasn't anyone inside.

There was a tightly closed paper door to their left. The ponytailed man approached it quickly and once again, opened the door with a single movement.

Only a single light was lit in that room, giving off a small amount of light. There was a red futon laid out on the floor, where it is slightly raised with a human like shape.

The ponytailed man grabbed one corner of the futon and threw it off.

There wasn't any sign of the chivalrous thief underneath the futon, only an Oiran with clothes in disarray.

“Where is that gigolo who manipulates strings?” (T/N: The other meaning of the Chinese word for Gigolo could also mean “pretty boy”, but considering the image they have of human Kubinashi, I'm guessing it's Gigolo)

The man asked calmly.

Shiragiku, with tears still in her eyes, gave a “Heh”, putting up a strong front as she laughed.

“About that, I don't know. I am the famous Shiragiku, so I won't sleep with any gigolos.”

"Hmph! You betrayed us, didn't you?"

The ponytailed man gave a cold smile.

"I was thinking why no one had come to report, who knew that it was really what I thought. It really looks like prostitutes will not betray their regular customers after all."

"It's not because he's a regular customer, but because I do not wish to betray the man I love, you idiot who does not understand romance."

Shiragiku countered roughly.

"You bitch!" The younger follower was about to roll up his sleeves when he was stopped by the ponytailed man.

"Stop. We can deal with the Oiran later, our target is the String Thief. Manager, there are men watching the back door, right?"

"Yes! They are keeping a close watch."

"Then most likely, the thief has not left the brothel. It's impossible to hide in the toilets continuously, and he could not have barged into the rooms of the other customers. Therefore the only hiding places would be the changing room of this Oiran or the room where they keep the futons. I will go with the manager of the changing room, you can go and search the futon room."

Having received the instructions from the ponytailed man, the follower immediately went to conduct his search.

He found out the location of the futon room from a passing prostitute, it was the room furthest down the corridor on the second floor.

The room where the sleeping items were kept would definitely not be opened to the public, so the door is always closed. The follower crept up to the door, there seems to be someone inside.

The follower gave a smile of glee, and lightly placed his hand on the door, then he opened the door with force.

Inside, there was a man and woman hugging each other. Amongst the piles of futons, the pair were kissing each other on the lips. The woman was a small Oiran, and had wavy long hair, forming a very uncommon shape at the back of her head.

Seeing the door opened suddenly, the Oiran turned around in surprise.

"Who's that? We were just starting to have fun... don't disturb us..."

The follower gave a 'Che', and slammed the door shut.

What the heck! Why did they start playing around in there. The follower left the room while mumbling these things.

After hearing the paper door close, and the fading of the footsteps, Kino, who had been passing off as an Oiran in the futon room let out a sigh of relief. The chivalrous thief, who had been leaning in Kino's chest also pulled his body away.

"Sorry, Kino."

"It's alright, it's great we managed to trick them."

Kino smiled as she re-arranged her clothes. Perhaps she was feeling very relieved, her way of speaking had reverted to that of the countryside.

The chivalrous thief went into a kneeling position, giving a small smile as he stood up.

"I've never thought that you could pretend to be an Oiran... I've always treated you as a child before."

"Haven't I said so before? I'm not that young anymore."

"That's right, you've grown."

"Has my chest grown bigger as well?"

Seeing Kino smile mischievously, the chivalrous thief just said, "Don't say things like that", turning his face away.

However, the jokes end here. This was the only chance to escape the brothel.

The chivalrous thief pulled out his strings, placed his hand on the door, then turned back towards Kino, saying,

"Kino, thank you for saving me. I'm leaving."

"How are you going to leave? There are people guarding the back door..."

"Don't worry, I am a thief. I'll definitely be able to get out."

The man smiled confidently, and even swung his strings around, perhaps he had already thought of a way to escape using his strings.

"Even though I am leaving in quite a hurry, I will still visit Shiragiku again."

The chivalrous thief said. The smile on his face was already gone.

"Yeah! Okay!" Kino nodded in reply.

"Goodbye."

Saying that, the chivalrous thief opened the door, leaving the room quickly.

After the door closed, and the presence of the man disappeared, the room became quiet once again. In the stuffy room piled with futons, Kino remained in the same spot.

---Kino, I want you to go with Thief-san to the futon room and be intimate with one another.

Kino, who was instructed by Shiragiku, had completed her task.

Not long ago, she received Shiragiku's instructions.

Kino was playing by herself in front of the guest room when someone called her name softly. She entered the guest room, and saw Shiragiku and that man inside. Shiragiku's eyes were swollen from crying, while the man had a very stern look on his face, she could tell that something was wrong.

Then, Shiragiku explained everything amidst her choking sobs.

She was threatened by Hagiya to find some way to make Thief-san drunk, and when he is unable to think clearly, she was to send people to inform Hagiya. If not, her family would die.

The people from Hagiya are waiting in front of the brothel for the signal. If she really sent someone to inform them, then people will be sent to capture the man. Doing that is akin to betraying Thief-san.

Hearing this, Kino was very shocked.

She did not know that so many things were happening behind her back. She has always thought that Shiragiku was acting listless recently because she was sick, but she was actually carrying such a heavy burden by herself.

If she continued to do nothing, the people outside will soon lose their patience and come. So she needs to have Kino and Thief-san to act out something to tide over this danger. Shiragiku quickly explained.

Having been told so many things at one go, Kino only felt that her mind was in a mess, and she was unable to understand everything fully.

However, as long as she works hard, she would be able to help “Thief-san” in this dangerous situation. Thinking about this, Kino felt a surge of happiness rise in her chest.

After listening to Shiragiku’s explanation, Kino and the chivalrous thief headed towards the futon room.

The two people hid in the futon room for a while, not daring to make a sound. After a while, Kino felt that there was someone standing outside the door, so she quickly pulled open her top to expose her chest, and without hesitation, placed her lips over that of the man.

---This is my first kiss...

Couples who are deeply in love would definitely do something like this.

I wish that my *first time* would be given to “Thief-san”.

After knowing about this, this wish has always been present in Kino’s heart.

Even in her dreams, she would have never guessed that it would be today, and under these circumstances. This isn’t a dream, but reality, in this current moment.

The touch she had with the man, she could still feel it on her lips. However, Kino could not remain in the grasps of these sweet memories forever.

I wonder if “Thief-san” would be able to get out of here successfully.

Also, Shiragiku, who was left by herself in the room, was also a source of worry.

When the thought that Shiragiku could be interrogated harshly at this moment crossed Kino’s mind, she became very restless. But Shiragiku had instructed her not to return to the guest room.

Tonight, what kind of ending would it be? Kino, who was filled with many thoughts and feelings, felt extremely conflicted.

Chapter 8

The following night, the chivalrous thief found out from Kino that Shiragiku had been taken by the people of Hagiya.

The day after he escaped Akizakiya, during the day, the man hid at a location which only his comrades would know about. When night fell, he returned to Yoshiwara immediately, to find information on Shiragiku’s whereabouts.

Kino was standing at the back door of Akizakiya, like she was waiting for the man to appear.

“Thief-san, Shiragiku onee-san was bought by Hagiya and taken away.”

Kino said.

Being bought referred to a rich merchant or a high ranking Samurai paying off a prostitute's debts, so she would not have to sell her body anymore. For the prostitutes who were bought, not only were they able to leave Yoshiwara, it was also a large source of income for the brothel, so it was supposed to be a happy occasion.

However, the meaning behind Shiragiku being sold this time was largely different from the usual clearing of one's debts, this was because the one that helped clear off her debts was Hagiya. Even though it was the clearing of debts by name, but it was no different from being forcefully taken away.

The usual process of debt clearing was more complex than this. First they will have to negotiate terms with the boss of the brothel, prepare the debt clearing documents, give gifts to the head caretaker of the prostitutes, and hold a celebration banquet. But Hagiya used a large amount of money to bypass all these processes and took Shiragiku away immediately.

"Kino, thank you for telling me."

As the man said this, the rage he felt was clearly seen in his eyes.

The man was about to turn and leave when he heard Kino's sorrowful voice.

"Thief-san, what are you going to do?"

The man stopped, and with his back still facing Kino, he answered,

"I'm going to Hagiya to save Shiragiku."

"You can't... it's a trap!"

"That's right, I'm going to walk into their trap on purpose, then I'll be able to rescue Shiragiku."

"No! You'll be killed!"

"Then so be it! Ever since I became a thief, I am already closely tied to death."

"Thief-san!" Once again, Kino shouted towards the retreating back, but that figure did not stop at all.

With an enraged look on his face, the man walked through the streets of Yoshiwara.

The music from the Shimasen and Guzheng, drunk customers and calls from the prostitutes. The Yoshiwara tonight was the same as any other day. Even if Akizakiya was missing one prostitute called Shiragiku, it did not affect this street at all.

---This world has no meaning at all.

This thought suddenly occurred to the man, and at the same time, he understood the coldness of the people in his world. No matter who was crying in a corner, as long as it had nothing to do with them, then they did not have to care. And because of this coldness, there was no meaning staying in this world.

The man left Yoshiwara through the main gate, and continued walking forward. With every step he took, the rage which he harboured only grew in intensity.

Head towards Hagiya, save Shiragiku. That was all the man thought about, he did not even have a plan as to how he was going to conduct the rescue.

Stealing money without taking a single life, that was the principle of a chivalrous thief.

---But, it might be different this time.

If someone stands in his way, he would have to kill that person. The man, filled with murderous intent, was fully prepared to do such a thing.

The man approached the intersection of two streets. After turning left there, he would reach the mansion of Hagiya.

Once he reached the intersection, a voice was heard suddenly.

"Sir, where are you going?"

The man had not heard this voice before, and he froze in shock. Then, a figure appeared from the shadows of the street, it was one of his thief comrades, Seisuke. Seisuke, who could change his voice at will, intentionally used a different voice to scare the man.

"Seisuke... don't scare people like that."

"Seeing that you're heading towards Hagiya with such murderous intent, you're planning to save that Oiran?"

Seisuke reverted back to his actual voice, and said this to the man.

The man had mentioned Shiragiku to Seisuke before. Even though he never said that he is in love with Shiragiku, but Seisuke was someone who made a living in Yoshiwara, and was sensitive towards the feelings between men and women, so he had already sensed the man's feelings.

"Aren't you being too distant, why didn't you ask me to come along too?"

Seisuke said with a smirk.

"This is a personal matter, I should carry this burden alone."

Hearing the man's answer, Seisuke started to laugh.

"Stop acting cool! For the sake of the woman you love, you rather send yourself to your death?"

"I'm not sending myself to my death! I will save Shiragiku and come back alive, just you see."

"Hagiya set some traps, do you know?"

This sentence was heard from some distance ahead. Then Kichijiro appeared from that spot.

"You wouldn't be able to detect those traps, I'm going with you."

"Kichijiro, why are you here too..."

The man sighed.

"We have always been working together, so don't force yourself anymore, let us join in."

"I've said that this is a personal matter! This time, we're not being chivalrous thieves, but snatching a woman."

The man rejected them determinedly, but Seisuke did not give up,

"Then we'll do this, you steal the woman, while *Ki-chan* and I steal the money."

"....."

"Even though we are stealing different things, but the destination is the same, so it won't be a problem if we went together."

Seisuke said, Kichijiro also nodded.

"The two of us are only stealing the woman *at the same time*..... that would be fine, right?"

"Even if I said no, you would still follow, right."

"Heh! As long as you're aware of that."

Seisuke laughed, Kichijiro also let out a heh.

"...Thank you."

The man thanked them in a simple manner and continued forward, with Seisuke and Kichijiro on his left and right.

Hagiya's mansion slowly appeared in front of them. The size of the mansion was stunning, and was surrounded by walls on all sides. The tall pine trees grew over the fence, their branches extending into the darkness.

The three of them exchanged glances, nodded, then nimbly flipped over the wall.

There were people keeping watch around the yard, the chivalrous thieves carefully avoided the sight of all the guards, and entered the house. Even though they had prior experience infiltrating the treasuries, this is their first time infiltrating the house. Besides the treasury, the heavily paranoid Ribei would have set traps inside the house as well. The three of them avoided the traps based on Kichijiro's senses, advancing very carefully.

Their target was Ribei's bedroom. If Shiragiku was captured and bought to Hagiya's mansion, then she is most likely in the bedroom.

In addition, even if Shiragiku wasn't in the bedroom, as long as they find Ribei, they would be able to capture him, and ask about Shiragiku's whereabouts.

The group avoided the places where Kichijiro thought was dangerous and came to what looked like the master's living quarters. There will normally be a bedroom inside a house, so it will be in the living quarters or the next room.

The man pulled out his strings, and glanced towards his two comrades, the two of them nodded in reply.

The man put his hand on the paper door, opening the door quickly.

It was empty. There was only a neat and flat tatami floor in the cold room.

In addition, there was a door in front, as well as on the left and right. The three of them looked at one another, and decided to open the door in front of them.

They lightened their steps and quickly crossed the large room to stand in front of the paper door directly in front of them. Just as they were about to press their ears to the door to hear what was happening inside---

"I finally caught you, thieves."

The voice came from behind them.

Turning around, they saw Ribei standing in front of the door which they had just passed through. Even though he was short, he had a good amount of body mass, the ponytailed man, with a sword at his waist, was also standing beside him.

"Hagiya..."

The man said to himself.

"Hmph! It's just as Teacher said."

Ribei said to the man at his side with a smile.

"I've never expected that I would be able to capture these three rats as long as I adjust the traps a little..."

"It's simple."

The ponytailed man also twisted his mouth, revealing a wicked smile.

"The people with sensitive senses will always rely too much on their senses. Even if they can use their senses to avoid the traps, but doing so will only bring about another danger of being led someplace. It looks like rodents will always be rodents, lacking in analytical ability."

Kichijiro gritted his teeth, but didn't say anything.

On the surface, the three of them did choose their own path, but in reality, they had been used by Hagiya, and were led to this room.

But whether they were here by their own choice or not, it was not an important issue. In fact, Ribei voluntarily showing himself here saved the man a lot of trouble.

"Where is Shiragiku?"

The man asked as he wrapped one end of the string around his right fist.

"The reason for paying off Shiragiku's debts was to draw me here, right? Since I'm here, hand Shiragiku over."

"Hmph! You look so calm, but you're actually all anxious inside, aren't you? But unfortunately... the Oiran isn't here now."

"What do you mean by that?"

Ribei paused intentionally, like he intended to torment the man.

"Answer me! What do you mean by not being here?"

"She died."

At that moment, the man felt that he had been stabbed in the chest with a knife.

Seeing that the sentence had a tremendous effect which thoroughly affected the man, Ribei gave a satisfied smile, and he continued,

"I captured her last night, and after forcing her to divulge information on you, I locked her in the room. However, when I returned in the morning, she had committed suicide by ingesting poison. I didn't know where she hid the poison, or why she needed to have poison on her person... is it a habit of the prostitutes? Whatever, that's not important, but her appearance was still really stunning, even in death, she's still so captivating..."

A beast like roar interrupted Ribei.

The sound had come from the man. Before his mind had the chance to think, his body had moved on its own. He raised his right hand, and the string shot towards Ribei's neck.

However, the ponytailed man drew his sword at the same time. The string which should have coiled around Ribei's neck, wrapped around the ponytailed man's sword.

"How skilled! So this is the legendary string wielding thief..."

The ponytailed man smiled lightly as he said this. Then the string tightened, and the two people sized each other up, separated by the string.

“Hagiya...what you said just now...is that true?”

The man’s voice shook because of the anger he felt.

“Why should I lie to you? Her body *has been disposed of*, but her belongings are still here.”

Take it! Rabei threw something on the tatami when he said this, it was the cheap hairpin which the man had given her.

Another angry shout rose up from the man’s throat.

He used his left hand to shoot out another string, but it was also blocked by the ponytailed man.

Rabei half concealed his body behind the ponytailed man, and continued to speak.

“But this woman was really courageous, seeing that she is already dead, I will let her family off.”

“You bastard, you deserve death...”

“The ones who deserve death are you!”

Rabei, hiding behind the ponytailed man, continued,

“Actually stealing from me three times...hmph! So what if one Oiran died, my anger hasn’t dissipated at all. All of you should die here today!”

“Shut up!”

The man pulled the string with all his strength, and the sword left the man’s hands. However, it wasn’t because the man had surpassed the ponytailed man in strength, but because the ponytailed man had let go of the sword. The ponytailed man’s sword flew towards the man like a fish on a hook. Then, the man caught the sword from the air, took the string off it, and threw the sword on the floor.

Even though the ponytailed man had lost a sword, he still had another one at his waist.

“Draw your sword.”

The man said.

“Use your sword and fight with me!”

“A lowly thief like you has no right to speak the words of a samurai.”

The ponytailed man still had a relaxed smile on his face.

“I’m definitely going to kill you...”

“Hmph! How scary, it looks like you’re really flaring up, but I’m not going to draw my sword.”

The ponytailed man said in a relaxed tone.

“I am very skilled, and for a thief, you are also very skilled. Therefore, if we fight, it will be difficult to determine the winner. But, I know of a way to make the fight end quickly. We’ll just have to send out someone more powerful than me.”

“... ..?”

Confused, the man frowned, unable to understand the meaning of the man's words. He suddenly had a very bad feeling.

“Now, I present the people who are more powerful than me!”

Immediately after the ponytailed man finished speaking, the paper doors on the left and right opened.

Seeing the people standing on the other side of the paper door, the thieves froze.

“These...who are these people...?”

Seisuke couldn't help but shout, his voice changing in tone.

Hidden behind the paper doors were creatures with strange appearances.

Amongst these creatures, there was one with sharp horns in its hair, one covered in scales, a Samurai wearing full body armour surrounded by ghost fire, a Giant wielding a stick, and a ghost lady with long sharp claws.

“Are they... Youkai...”

The man said slowly. The ponytailed man nodded.

“It should be the first time you're seeing Youkai right? These Youkai are really strong, a few hundred times stronger than me.”

“You...how did you manage to tame these Youkai?”

The man asked as he quickly surveyed his surroundings. The exits were all blocked and there were no means of escape. Left, right and behind, these three directions were all blocked off by Youkai.

“Tame? You've got it wrong! We are just cooperating.”

The ponytailed man said.

“These guys are really useful, and most importantly, they are very powerful. No matter how much we humans train ourselves, we won't be able to match up to their natural monster strength and Youkai skills. Therefore, rather than polishing our skills, wouldn't it be better to cooperate with Youkai and let them work, thus saving our time and effort? Of course, we do reward them. If they want money, we give them money. If they want liver, we give them liver. As long as we satisfy them, even the fiercest Youkai can be working partners.”

“Just now, didn't I say that we disposed of the Oiran's body?”

Ribei's smile became more eerie by the second, and he continued,

“Her body was disposed of by the Youkai. There was one Youkai who liked to eat women's corpses, so I gave it to him to indulge.”

“... ..!”

The man's mind was blank, and he was unable to think at all. When he returned to his senses, he discovered that his legs had become weak, and he was kneeling on one knee. Seeing the man's reaction, Ribei laughed.

“Hahahaha! This is so satisfying! This is the fate of the people who oppose Hagiya, repent in Hell!”

---Shiragiku...

The man said in his heart.

---Because you were involved with me...I was the one who dragged you into this...

The man lost all strength in his body, and finally, his other knee also touched the floor. His tears dropped on top of his hands, which were on his lap.

"Hmph! Weren't you really calm just now? And now you've broken down just by hearing the death of your own woman, such a useless man."

Ribei berated the man in a belittling tone, then,

"Teacher, it's about time for us to act..."

He said to the ponytailed man. The ponytailed man nodded, and faced the Youkai.

"Youkai, it's time to get to work. Get rid of these three people."

Under the orders of the ponytailed man, the Youkai rushed towards the trio of chivalrous thieves.

It was easy to see who the victors will be---No! In this kind of battle situation, it can't even be called a victory.

The Youkai covered in scales had a very long tail. With just one swing of its tail, the Youkai easily pierced Seisuke's chest. Seisuke coughed up a large amount of blood, and amongst his moans, he stopped breathing.

The large Oni grabbed Kichijiro's head with its large hands, and crushed his head directly.

"Seisuke! Kichijiro!"

The man had just shouted out, when he felt a pain in his chest. The armoured Samurai surrounded by ghost fire used his sword to pierce his chest. Following that, other Youkai, wielding another sharp sword, pierced the man in the back, or used their sharp teeth to crush his shoulder.

The scene in front of him started to blur. His whole body was in pain, like he was immersed in boiling water, but his inner body temperature was dropping rapidly.

Shiragiku... the man mumbled her name. He didn't know if his breathing still held some strength behind it. Shiragiku... he called out the Oiran's name once again.

The man, covered in blood, collapsed on to the floor, but he was still barely alive.

The hairpin which he gave Shiragiku was only a short distance away from him. The man reached towards it, but a sword pierced his palm, pinning his hand to the floor.

In his blurry consciousness, a person stood in front of him. Those feet were wearing boots, so they did not belong to Youkai, but a human---also known as Ribei. He squatted down, and said to the man,

"Die! Go to Hell and meet your Oiran, you lowlife!"

Saying this, Ribei immediately swung the short sword he had in his hands downwards, and with one attack, he ended the remaining life of the chivalrous thief.

The next day, the head of the chivalrous thief was displayed in the execution grounds, he had received the punishment of being beheaded.

The chivalrous thief, which had caused a quite a commotion amongst the people, had been caught while trying to steal from Hagiya, and was given the death sentence by the authorities. Normally, after criminals were beheaded, their bodies were used to test the sharpness of the swords, however, *as the chivalrous thief was too heavily injured when he was caught*, he was not used as a test subject, but thrown into a river near the execution grounds. As for *his other two accomplices, their whereabouts were unknown---*

This was the news spread around the streets.

However, this information were just lies, made up by Hagiya and spread with the help of the authorities. The truth where the three thieves were cruelly murdered by Youkai was of course, not revealed or found out.

The night when Akizakiya's Kino heard about the death of "Thief-san", she hid in her futon and cried until she had no energy left. More tragically, it wasn't the only bad news she received.

The next day, she heard that Shiragiku, who had been bought by Hagiya, *had passed away from illness*.

This isn't true, Kino thought.

---Thief-san didn't die because he was prosecuted by the authorities.

---Shiragiku onee-san definitely will not die suddenly from an illness.

However, Kino was only 13 years old at that time, she did not have the ability to find out the truth, and did not know where to look for help.

Ever since the day she found out Shiragiku no longer existed in this world, Kino contracted a high fever which wouldn't go away. She rejected food and drink and cried for a full three days. Seeing Kino become weaker day by day, the people in the brothel were heartbroken, but they did not dare to speak, and silently remained at her side.

Chapter 9

"Kino, you're becoming more charming day by day."

"Hoho! Soumoya-sensei, thank you for your praises, you have a way with your words."

"I'm not saying this just to be polite. But really, even though I knew you were very cute since early on, I never thought that you would be able to become an Oiran. How old are you this year?"

"I'm already 19."

"Really? You're already 19! No wonder you're so developed. Just look at those lascivious *breasts...*"

Saying that, the old man stretched out his hands. Kino quickly pushed his hands down.

"Not now. Drink more and warm your body first, then you can spoil Kino properly."

"Heh heh, the skill you have at *whetting someone's appetite* is really top notch, Kino."

"Hoho, thank you for your praise."

Then Kino threw a flirtatious look towards the boss of Soumoya, and refilled his wine.

Night time at Yoshiwara is lively because of its brothels. In the guest room of Akizakiya, the old man, with his wrinkled face and reddened cheeks, was one of Kino's regular customers.

Soumoya is a traditional store which makes Kimono, and is famous amongst the common folk. This old man, who had retired from being its boss, always acted like a gentlemen when he comes to enjoy himself at the brothel. He

was also generous, and would give large tips wrapped in red packets for the performers and the odd job workers. Even though he would talk about some lewd topics with that wrinkled face, he knew to stop before he went too far and disgusted others. With regards to these players who were advanced in age, Kino did not dislike them at all.

The Kino now is an Oiran who could work independently. Her beauty and charisma allowed her to become a very popular prostitute, and she was promoted to the highest ranking Oiran of Akizakiya last year. Even though some prostitutes were jealous that she could be promoted to the position at such a young age, Kino did not care about such matters. This accommodating spirit was also one of Kino's charms.

Once a person becomes a popular Oiran, they would quickly meet people who are willing to pay off their debts. Kino was no exception.

Besides the master from Soumaya sitting next to her, there have been some rich merchants who have mentioned the issue of paying off the debts to her. But Kino has rejected them all.

Within this group of suitors, some of the conditions they listed were so lucrative that only an idiot would reject such a deal. But no matter how much the rich merchants tried to persuade her, Kino has never changed her mind.

She had only one man in her heart. The face which sometimes showed loneliness, or showed a kind smile...

That man was Thief-san.

The first time she saw that man, Kino was already thoroughly fascinated by him. However, from that same moment, Kino knew that the romance will never be fulfilled.

That was when Kino was 8 years old.

Thief-san had fallen in love with Shiragiku, also known as the jewel of Akizakiya, at first sight, and Shiragiku, after a few interactions, had started to fall in love with this chivalrous thief.

A child, at just 8 years old, was unable to meddle in the world of romance. Kino could only continue to work beside Shiragiku while carrying the pain of being unable to fulfil her wish. However, if she had to leave Shiragiku's side because of this, Kino did not mind at all.

Towards Shiragiku, who had fallen in love with the same man, Kino would definitely develop feelings of jealousy. But putting this aside, Shiragiku was indeed a kind and cheerful older sister. Even though having a crush which will not bear fruit is painful, if her rival in love was Shiragiku, Kino was willing to back off. Shiragiku was the sort of person who would make you willing to sacrifice yourself to help her.

However, when Kino was 13 years old, the crush which will not bear any results took on another form.

Hagiya forcefully paid off Shiragiku's debts, and brought her away. In order to rescue Shiragiku, Thief-san was caught and beheaded as a punishment.

After hearing about his death, Kino considered following his footsteps to the other world, and even curled up in the darkness of her room, holding a shaving blade. What pulled her back from the boundary of life and death was her hatred for Hagiya.

Shiragiku died in Hagiya, Thief-san was also killed by Hagiya, and if she was included as well, it will be three lives. There cannot be a third life lost. She needs to live on. With this determination and in honour of the memory of Thief-san, she continued to live on.

In order to overcome her sadness, Kino buried herself in the training needed for a prostitute, diligently learning the Shimasen and Guzhang, as well as observing the other prostitutes as work to learn their techniques.

After a period of focused training, Kino finally became an unrivalled Oiran in Yoshiwara.

“But Kino, I really do not understand you, why are you always rejecting the people who want to pay off your debt? Don’t tell me you already have a man in mind?”

The elderly man, slightly buzzed, would always ask the same question a few times every month. Tonight, he asked again.

Kino’s answer has not changed as well.

“How can there be a man. I just prefer drinking and talking with Master.”

“Hmph! You say this all the time, forget it! But Kino, let me tell you this, when you find a partner, you need to keep your eyes open, no matter how attractive the other party is, you need to confirm his background. Like chivalrous thieves, don’t get involved with them at all.”

Kino’s hand, which was holding the wine bottle, suddenly stopped.

“Master, what do you mean by that?”

“Recently, everyone has been talking about Kubinashi, don’t you know about it?”

“Kubinashi...?”

“That’s right! Kubinashi is the name of a Youkai. He appears on the streets of Edo every night, and I heard he was involved with Akizakiya in the past. So you don’t know at all! Well then, just treat it as a way of passing the time, Master here will explain this to you...”

The elderly person starting to talk, his voice in the low tone of a scholar,

“According to the tales, this Youkai was a chivalrous thief, and in the past, he would always ask for the Oiran Shiragiku. However, this Oiran was bought by Hagiya, who owned a rice business and died due to illness. And the chivalrous thief was captured while trying to steal from Hagiya, executed and displayed in public. Perhaps he was full of regret at being killed, so he actually revived, became a Youkai, and will appear on the streets of Edo at night. It might be because he is searching for his beloved Oiran, or for the sake of revenge, he plans to punish the black hearted merchants, which is why he is wandering around... as for why he is called “Kubinashi”, according to the eye witnesses, it’s because for the chivalrous thief Youkai, *his head and body aren’t connected together*, so he was given that name.”

“... ..”

“But not connected together doesn’t mean he only has a body, his head is floating above his body. So even he is caught and beheaded again, there will be no neck to cut, haha! That is the rumours spreading in the streets. The love between a thief and an Oiran won’t lead to a good ending at all, it seems.”

“... ..”

Hearing these words, Kino was rendered speechless and she went stiff, her heartbeat accelerating.

Soumaya became Kino’s regular customer two years ago, so he did not know that Kino used to be Shiragiku’s little sister, and knew the chivalrous thief.

(T/N: This does not refer to an actual little sister, but the relationship between an Oiran and a Kamuro)

Excluding this clueless elderly man, this news was a big blow to Kino.

---Thief-san has turned into a Youkai...?

With regards to these rumours, Kino was still sceptical, and was unsure how to treat it.

The issue about Kubinashi being a Youkai. Did Youkai really exist in this world? Thinking about this, the expression on Kino's face became serious. Things like Oni or Tengu should only exist in stories, and will definitely not appear in reality.

But, if the rumours about "Kubinashi" were true, it meant that "Thief-san" had returned to this world.

Maybe she would be able to meet the Thief-san she thought she would never meet again. Just this thought made a warm feeling rise up in her chest.

---It doesn't matter even if it's Youkai.

Kino thought. She wants to see that person again. If it's possible, she really wants to see him again.

"Kino, what's wrong? Did this story scare you?"

The Master from Soumaya asked. Kino, who was deep in thought, took a very long time to reply.

Chapter 10

After that, Kino started to go around, gathering information about Kubinashi.

Besides the prostitutes in the brothel's teahouse, her information sources include customers other than the Master of Soumaya.

There was also news of Kubinashi in the newspaper bought by the young boy in charge of pulling in customers.

The information written in the newspaper was more detailed than the information she had gathered, it was written,

---when the Youkai known as Kubinashi leaves the scene, there will be *bodies of unidentified creatures left behind...*

The prostitutes who heard this shrank back out of fear, and only Kino reacted differently.

I still want to see him. Even though the news report said that bodies will be left behind in places where Kubinashi had been, her feelings of love and admiration for Thief-san won over the fear she felt.

But if she wants to see him, she would need to walk through the gates of Yoshiwara. That was because in all the rumours, there were none about Kubinashi appearing in Yoshiwara.

In order to prevent the prostitutes who owe them a debt from escaping, it was a rule that they cannot leave Yoshiwara.

Now there are only two ways to leave Yoshiwara. One is to dress up as a man, because men will not be checked and are able to enter and leave Yoshiwara freely. The second way is to obtain a "Stamp", which is a pass for the gates of Yoshiwara. As long as you have the stamp, women can enter and leave Yoshiwara freely, but there will be a need to disguise as a lady from a well off family.

It wasn't easy to create a fake stamp, because Kino did not have any contacts for doing such a thing. In addition, even if she did get the stamp, there was still the trouble of having to disguise herself. Compared to that, it will be much simpler to dress up as a man.

For the clothes, she could borrow them from the younger male helpers in the brothel. As for her hair, even if she couldn't comb it into a male style, she would be able to cover her hair entirely with a scarf. Doing so might be risky, but Kino decided to risk using such a method.

According to the information Kino received, the locations specified by the eyewitness accounts were spread out, and did not concentrate on any particular area, so she was unable to search any specific area. She could only walk around the streets and try her luck.

Following that, every 10 days, Kino will disguise as a man and roam the streets at night.

Even though she might not be able to meet Thief-san, rather than feeling down every time she hears about Kubinashi at the brothel, she might as well see if she is able to grasp that chance.

During the third time she went to the streets to search, Kino finally met Kubinashi.

It was just past 10pm, Kino stopped just beside a drain in a certain street.

Around 18 metres in front of her was a familiar silhouette. Hair tied into a loose ponytail, the scarf around his neck, the short tunic he's wearing, and long pants in which the material below the knee level was stuffed into bandages wrapped around his thigh...this person is Thief-san, there was no mistaking it.

Kino ran forward a few steps, and shouted in his direction,

"Thief-san...!"

The silhouette of the man who was called shifted. Kino moved forward a few more steps, seeing the scene in front of her more clearly.

The man was holding strings in both his hands. And at his feet, just like the newspaper report has said, were large numbers of scattered corpses.

At that moment, the man turned his head to the side. That face, was the same as the one which Kino had always been thinking about.

Kino, who was finally able to see Thief-san, found it difficult to hold down the strong feelings she had, but when she saw the man turn his head, she received a big shock.

--- The man's head is floating above his body.

The scene in front of her was exactly how Master Soumaya had described it, his head was not connected to his body, and was floating in the air.

But Kino was not afraid at all, her face did not display any expression of fear.

---Ahh, Thief-san, you have really become Kubinashi...

In Kino's heart, she only felt pity and heartbreak.

"Thief-san, it's me, Kino!"

Kino said as she pulled away her scarf, her lustrous hair falling around her shoulders.

Kubinashi gave a conflicted expression, like he wanted to say something but he stopped himself, and in the end, he left scene without saying anything. His floating head and his body, slowly vanished into the darkness.

"Ah! Thief-san!"

Kino called, but Kubinashi did not stop.

Even after his loosely tied hair disappeared into the darkness, Kino remained where she was.

Chapter 11

The strange thing is, once Kubinashi opened his eyes, he understood the current situation immediately.

---I died, and I became a Youkai known as Kubinashi.

When he woke up, this piece of information was already present in his mind.

Kubinashi was lying on the ground. It seems like this place is a riverbank.

He stood up, and found out that his body and head were in strange places, his head had changed places. Ah, no wonder it's called "Kubinashi", Kubinashi confirmed his point once again.

The memories before his death were perfectly preserved.

Shiragiku, Hagiya, Seisuke and Kichijiro, and the process of being killed by Hagiya's Youkai, he remembered all of this clearly---

When he recalled what had happened before he died, he was filled with rage.

Kubinashi was filled with bitter hatred for Hagiya Ribe, and towards the Youkai, he felt strong hatred and distrust.

---Youkai---

Kubinashi mumbled in the darkness.

Ever since the olden times, haven't you always been existing in another world? Why do you have to interfere with the human world?

Is it for money? For fresh blood? Or is it for the livers? Or was it for other things? As long as someone lays out the bait, would you wag your tails at the corrupt merchants like starving dogs?

So Youkai are just lowlives. From another world, they do immoral things to serve under the corrupt merchants.

If that is so, then Youkai do not deserve to exist.

Youkai are just beasts which endanger humans.

Then, I'll just kill all the Youkai!

That's right! I'm a Youkai as well, but I would not do something like becoming a lackey of those corrupt merchants.

---I am the hunter.

Kubinashi thought as he glared into the darkness.

Youkai, which will only endanger society, should be caught and killed. I have become a Youkai and returned to this world for this.

Kubinashi searched in the pockets of his clothes, and found out that the string he owned when he was alive was still present. He grasped the string tightly, walking along the rock covered riverbank.

From that night, Kubinashi started to kill the Youkai in the street.

It might be because he had turned into a Youkai, so he could sense the locations where Youkai might appear. He headed towards those places, using his string to hang and kill the Youkai, or wrap the string around their bodies, slicing them into pieces.

Kubinashi did not fear the Youkai at all.

As long as the memory of him being killed by the Youkai exists, he would be able to continue killing.

The rumours that Kubinashi was prowling about, leaving corpses at places he had been, spread quickly throughout Edo.

The ones who heard the rumours weren't just humans, even the Youkai were afraid.

Very good, Kubinashi thought as he smiled in the darkness.

The Youkai who attack humans, possess humans and caused humans to fear them, will now have someone they regard as a nightmarish existence, Kubinashi.

"Remember this. I am Kubinashi, Hitachi's String Assassin. Go to Hell knowing this!"

Before he acts, Kubinashi will announce his name.

Even after they die and go to Hell, they will continue to fear Kubinashi, that was his purpose.

Shiragiku was no longer around, and I have no more comrades. All that remains in this world is me, the hunter, and the Youkai which will be killed by me. Kubinashi spent every single day with this strong murderous intent.

At this time, Kubinashi heard Kino calling him.

When Kubinashi was still alive and a Thief, the last time he saw Kino was the night he went to Hagiya to save Shiragiku. Kino was 13 years old then.

Now, Kino had become an attractive person. Even if they had some distance between them, and she was dressed like a man, he could see Kino's beauty with once glance.

That's right, Kino was still in this world. Kubinashi, as if he had just woken up from a dream, was close to smiling.

However, he resisted doing so. He suppressed the feelings of wanting to talk to Kino and ran towards the darkness.

---Kino, I am "Thief-san" no longer. I am Kubinashi, I've become a Youkai!

Kino was not a stranger, if he spoke with her, feelings will develop. If so, the hatred in his heart will diminish, and he might stop killing Youkai because of that. So Kubinashi decided not to approach Kino.

Kubinashi had investigated Hagiya's mansion before.

The huge mansion was no different from when Kubinashi had been alive, and the pine trees which grew over the walls were at well-maintained as before, however, this neatness gave off the feeling of arrogance which pissed Kubinashi off.

Kubinashi hid in the shadows of the well used for extinguishing fires, eavesdropping on the current situation of the residence. After a while, the master, Ribe, and the ponytailed man appeared. The two men were speaking in low voices about something, with smiles on his faces, and it seemed like they were planning to drink and party that night.

There was no big change in the ponytailed man's appearance. As for the plump Ribe, it seemed like he had gotten fatter.

Kubinashi stuck his hands into his clothes, gripping the strings tightly.

How I wish to just rush out there immediately and kill them, but Kubinashi gritted his teeth and pushed down that thought.

The ponytailed man was skilled, but that was not the reason why Kubinashi decided not to act.

He just thought, if he just carelessly ran out like this, he might attract a big group of Youkai like before, so he had to be careful.

Kubinashi swore to kill Ribe, so he cannot have the Youkai spoil everything. So he would need to train himself continuously to the point where he could face any kind of Youkai and kill them easily, then he will take the lives of Ribe and the ponytailed man.

Right now, his most important mission is to train his skills at using his strings. When he is able to make sure that his string killing techniques can guarantee a kill every single time, he would be able to erase Hagiya's existence.

Therefore, Kubinashi will need to hunt more Youkai, to increase the level of his skills.

---Hunt more Youkai...I need to hunt more Youkai...

Chapter 12

Since the day she met Kubinashi, Kino changed.

When she met customers, Kino always acted like she had something else on her mind, halting her usual flirtatious behaviour, and was no longer enjoyable to be with.

Her regular customers started to complain, saying that Kino's mood seemed to be getting worse, and that she was turning cold and distant, but Kino was unable to pick up her spirits to face her work.

She kept pining for Kubinashi. She continuously felt restless.

The rumours about Kubinashi going around killing Youkai did not fade, in fact, they only increased in intensity.

Countless bodies of Youkai tangled in strings were found by humans in the alleyways. Corpses of Youkai were found hanging off the trees of an abandoned temple. Bodies with severed limbs were found floating in the drains.

When rumours about Kubinashi came up, it was always connected with the bloody topic of "Youkai killings".

Kino did not know why Kubinashi continued to kill Youkai, and felt very sad for him at the same time.

Behind the massacring of countless Youkai was an endless amount of hatred. How much he hated Youkai was plain to see. Shouldering all this by himself, it could be seen how lonely Kubinashi was.

Kino has once asked her regular customers for information about Hagiya. And what she heard was that Hagiya was the same as before, continuously abusing their power for their own benefits.

The fact that Kubinashi had not moved against Hagiya also worried Kino a lot.

Maybe Kubinashi was waiting for the most opportune moment, Kino thought. If he did not care about that, then the worst case would be...

---Kubinashi, don't kill Youkai anymore.

Kino wished to tell Kubinashi this very much. You have already exterminated many Youkai, isn't that enough? Even if you continue to kill, there won't be any benefits!

However, these words would have no effect towards Kubinashi. The person he wants to kill the most is Hagiya. The Kubinashi now is just an avenger who has turned towards the darkness, filled with hatred.

However, at the edge of the darkness, there will only be a cliff of no return. That was what Kino believed.

I want to see Kubinashi. It doesn't matter if their conversation did not yield any result, all Kino wanted was to speak with him to share his loneliness. The feeling of being unable to trust anyone was a really helpless feeling, and she really wants to help this pitiful person.

The pining feelings Kino had for Kubinashi grew stronger day by day.

However, Kino was no longer able to go past the gates of Yoshiwara.

That night, when Kino returned to the brothel after finding Kubinashi, she was severely punished. The fact that she had been sneaking out was discovered by the owner of the brothel.

Sneaking out three times was still too frequent. A prostitute, who felt that Kino had been acting strange lately, saw her sneaking outside during the third time she did so, and reported this to the owner. This prostitute harboured strong feelings of jealousy, and was very jealous of Kino, who obtained the title of Oiran at a young age.

Kino was punished by getting hit with wooden sticks and deprived of food for a few days. Even though the whole process was hard to bear, but compared to the pain which she felt after hearing about the deaths of Thief-san and Shiragiku, these physical pains were nothing in comparison.

What was worse was that the surveillance of the brothel was increased after her punishment.

Even though she had been able to sneak out three times, it would not be that easy next time. Every time Kino went outside, there would be someone following her.

The clothes she used to disguise as a man were confiscated, and Kino was no longer able to slip pass the gates of Yoshiwara by disguising as a man.

Even under these circumstances, Kino's longing for Kubinashi increased day by day. The more she was unable to leave Yoshiwara, the more restless she felt.

Every time she heard news about Kubinashi appearing when she was in her bedroom, she would always bite her lip, anxiously stroking her hair.

---I miss you... I want to see you...

She didn't care if any of her regular customers came to see her, the person she wanted to see the most was Kubinashi. I want to catch a glimpse of him no matter what. Wanting to see someone but being unable to do so felt like a blade cutting into her heart.

Just as the torment she felt reached the limit of her tolerance, Kino heard some information from a customer. A customer in the corridor was talking to the prostitute he had requested,

"On my way here, I saw that guy at the bridge, the subject of the recent rumours, Kubinashi."

The customer mentioned the name of a certain town, and continued,

"He was standing on the bridge, and his head was floating, so it has to be Kubinashi."

Kino did not listen to the words which followed.

Kino was overcome with a sudden urge to run out. But her voice of reason stopped her recklessness and she quashed it with much difficulty.

Kino moved slowly, and walked to the front door of the brothel as nonchalantly as she could manage. She intentionally avoided the back door, because there will be guards posted there at any time.

The boy in charge of attracting customers was currently shouting to draw in visitors. This boy was also one of the people in charge of Kino's surveillance. Now, his gaze was focused on the customers, and he did not notice Kino.

Kino stepped out of the front door and mingling with the crowd, she left the brothel while thinking that it was actually this easy to sneak out. However, at this moment, the boy in charge of attracting customers shouted at Kino with a "Hey". She immediately sped up, running outside without looking back. The boy shouted loudly behind her, but she totally ignored him.

Kino ran forward without pause. Being hit by sticks, or demoted to the lowest ranking prostitute didn't matter at all, to hell with it!

I want to see Kubinashi. Kino thought single mindedly as she passed the gates of Yoshiwara.

Chapter 13

Kubinashi had never seen this kind of "Fear", and he lost completely.

The one who used the Fear was a man who led a Hyakki Yako, he referred to himself as the Second Head of the Nura Clan.

Just as Kubinashi was hunting Youkai as usual, he encountered the Hyakki Yako and was surrounded by them.

This was his first time seeing a Hyakki Yako. If it was a normal group of Youkai, Kubinashi had already met some a few times, but he had never seen a Hundred Demons roaming the street with a leader at its head.

However, Kubinashi did not feel any fear.

He knew that there is a Nura Clan in Edo, which gathered a lot of special Youkai from around Edo, but this group was of no importance to Kubinashi.

Kubinashi had no interest in forming an alliance by exchanging Sakuzaki. But he knew that he was attracting a lot of attention by hunting Youkai and would attract these Youkai one day.

That day would be tonight.

Kubinashi didn't think he would lose, his string killing technique had been polished till it was close to perfection. No matter what kind of Fear the opponent used, he was confident that he would be able to make the opponent submit to his strings.

However, Kubinashi was unable to land even one scratch on his opponent.

Even though the second head of the Nura Clan, wielding a long blade, seemed very laid back and sloppy, he was very skilled. In addition, he was able to use the Fear of his Hyakki, having them possess his sword and turning that into his own finishing attacks. Kubinashi did not understand the principles behind it, but he knew the Fear of the Commander was oppressively strong, so strong that other people couldn't help but laugh at the amount of power.

(T/N: As in laugh in the helplessness of the whole situation, not in amusement)

The feeling he had wasn't the fear of imminent death, but the feeling of awe at seeing a powerful being.

"This here...is called 'Matoi'! Only Youkai who lead a Hyakki can use this."

The Second Commander said this as he rested the sword against his shoulder. On the bridge, Kubinashi was covered in wounds, looking up at the Commander of the Nura Clan, who had a Hyakki behind him.

“You will become stronger when you have comrades, don’t you think so?”

The Second Commander said again.

But Kubinashi smiled coldly,

“Ha...what comrades? They will only get in the way. The people you need to protect will only drag you down.”

Kubinashi said as he thought about his comrades who were killed by Youkai, Seisuke and Kichijiro. As well as the one who might not be a comrade, but the woman he loved deeply, Shiragiku. That time, she committed suicide by drinking poison, and was eaten by Youkai...

“Losing one’s comrades will only bring despair. Now I will kill the whole of your Hyakki...”

Kubinashi, who said this, gave a desolate smile.

Tonight, I am going to die here. Rather than joining this guy’s group, I would rather go with a bang. He wants the Hyakki in front of him to have a taste of what it was like to lose their comrades.

“Is that so?”

The Second Commander only gave this simple reply, and did not continue speaking. It was as if his next sentence would be “If you want to die so much, then I would grant your wish”, said in a light-hearted tone.

The Second Commander stepped forward, and slowly raised his sword. At this moment---

“Wait!”

Suddenly, a woman’s voice was heard on the bridge.

The one who rushed out from the shadows of the willow tree by the bridge, was Kino, in her Oiran getup.

She ran up from behind, kneeled next to Kubinashi, and pleaded to the Commander,

“Sir, I beg of you! I will give you my life, but, can I ask you to ‘save’ this person?”

“Kino, mind your own business! Back down...”

In response to the tone Kubinashi used, not only did Kino not back down, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and pulled him to her chest. Kubinashi, being hugged by her, couldn’t help but blush.

“Don’t be like this!” Kubinashi wanted to get away from Kino, but at that moment, the Second Commander suddenly let of a sound of “Oi Oi”, and showed a troubled look.

“What is this? So you do have comrades who protect you.”

Kubinashi had a sudden realisation. The Commander’s off-hand comment had reminded Kubinashi. That’s right, it really is like this, Kubinashi wholeheartedly agreed.

---Kino has always been protecting me...

The darkness clouding Kubinashi’s heart seemed to clear, and for a short moment, he saw light.

He thought of the first time he escaped to Yoshiwara, and how shocked he had felt when faced with the extravagant city which did not sleep. That time, the person who brought him to the brothel to hide was Kino.

When Shiragiku was threatened by Hagiya to bring harm to Kubinashi, the one who brought him to another room and acted affectionate with him in order to save his life was also Kino.

Tonight, Kino knelt next to him, begging to the Hyakki, protecting him with all her might.

Even though he did not see it, but Kubinashi knew that Kino had remembered him, pined after him, giving her the courage to run here. So this is how protecting someone is like. There is one person who had always been protecting me.

"Listen up! Kubinashi."

The Second Commander's voice was suddenly heard.

"Giving up one's life without hesitation to protect a comrade... this woman shows true strength! Your strength is just a *bluff*. Not taking on any burden, and fighting alone, anyone can do that. But the Nura Clan fights to protect their important comrades. Don't you think it's a lot cooler that way?"

Not right, but cool. The way it was said stirred something in Kubinashi's heart.

Then, the Second Commander kept his sword, planning to turn and walk away. But he stopped, and turned his head to the side, saying to Kubinashi,

"... If you're interested, then join us. I can exchange Sakazuki with you."

Saying that, the Second Commander continued to walk away. The figure, wearing a vertical striped yukata, disappeared over the other side of the bridge. After a while, the Hyakki which followed behind him disappeared as well.

On the bridge, only Kubinashi and Kino were left. The night wind blew, and the surroundings were quiet.

Kubinashi breathed out lightly, his tense limbs relaxing.

"Thank you, Kino."

Kubinashi said, still in Kino's embrace. The feelings of embarrassment had faded totally.

"You saved me again."

"No! It's nothing much."

Kino shook her head, her luxurious hair swaying with the movement.

Kubinashi stood up. Even though he was seriously injured, it wasn't serious enough to immobilise him.

"How did you know that I was here?"

Kubinashi asked. Kino stood up and answered,

"I coincidentally heard a customer talking about you, and got so restless that I ran out of the brothel immediately."

"You idiot! Don't you know the consequences of doing that?"

"Forget about my situation, Thief-san. I want to say something to you."

"I'm not a Thief anymore, but the Youkai Kubinashi."

"Fine! Kubinashi, don't kill youkai anymore, okay?"

Kubinashi turned around, looked at Kino, and saw her determined expression. The reason for her running here, could be to say this sentence.

"No! I'm not going to stop."

Kubinashi answered.

"Kubinashi..."

Kino's eyes were filled with sadness.

"I'm still going to kill Youkai, but this is the last time."

Kino suddenly raised her head.

"The last time...?"

"Yes! I'm going to Hagiya to kill Riberi in order to settle the deaths of Shiragiku and my comrades. After I do that, I won't prey on Youkai anymore."

"But Riberi isn't a Youkai, right? Why do have to kill Youkai..."

"Don't you know? He keeps a few Youkai at his house. The night I went to rescue Shiragiku, my comrades and I were killed by Youkai."

"So that was what happened..."

Kino tightened her fist, placed on her chest, from the sadness.

"However, I definitely won't lose to them this time."

Kubinashi nodded, showing that he was full of confidence.

"Continuously killing Youkai has increased my power, my string manipulation techniques are more polished as well... even though I completely lost to the Nura Clan, the Youkai from Hagiya only know how to use brute force, so I will definitely win."

"Even if I try to stop you, you would still go, right?"

"Yes! Only this, I cannot agree."

"What happens after you kill Hagiya? What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know."

Kubinashi laughed lightly, and it soon became a dry laugh.

"I came back to this world because of revenge, so I have never thought about what happens after I get my revenge."

Chapter 14

After joining up with Youkai, Hagiya's business grew by leaps and bounds.

The one who suggested cooperating with Youkai was a ponytailed bodyguard. Riberi addresses him as Teacher.

Before coming to Edo, the ponytailed man stayed in Osaka. At that time, he did the same thing, recommending himself to a wealthy merchant, and getting employed as a bodyguard.

That merchant cooperated with the Head monk of the temple to open a large gambling den. At that time, there was a Youkai which lived in the temple, and after the ponytailed man introduced himself to that Youkai, he started to interact with the dark world of Youkai.

After that, the ponytailed man recognised the flourishing of Edo, and came to Oikura Town's Hagiya, showing off his sword skills and intelligence, as well as his involvement with Youkai.

Afterwards, Hagiya happened to mention to the ponytailed man about his gold frequently getting stolen by three thieves, and the ponytailed man suggested letting Youkai stay in his mansion. In order to protect the safety of his mansion and treasury, Youkai would do a better job than humans.

The suggestion of the ponytailed man turned out to be the right thing to do.

After using Shiragiku to attract the thieves, not only did the Youkai easily get rid of the thieves, they also became the treasury guards. After that, Hagiya's treasuries were never raided again.

In addition, besides their superb fighting skills, there were other uses for the Youkai.

Amongst these Youkai, there are those who live in water, and have the ability to spit out thick mist. By making use of this, they would be able to cover the boat in mist while smuggling goods, thus escaping the notice of the authorities.

Besides that, there are also Youkai who can move freely in tight spaces or high areas, he would be able to eavesdrop on the contents of the merchant association meetings that way, getting the news much faster than other people, which was very advantageous for Hagiya's development.

When communicating with other provinces, there was no need to use weaklings. Youkai would be able to reach the destination quickly, and there would be no need to fear mountain bandits.

The result of fully utilising the Youkai is the huge accumulation of Hagiya's wealth over the years and becoming Edo's richest merchant. Money was rolling in, and his treasuries were growing bigger, so full that you can imagine the treasury burping from the capacity. However, Ribei was still not satisfied, and yearned for more gold.

One night, Ribei ordered food from the most high class eatery, eating and drinking wine. The ponytailed man was there as well.

In order to discuss about how to earn more money, to these two men, these were the best side dishes that would go with the wine. It didn't matter how other people cried and groaned, the continuation of Hagiya's wealth was the most important.

After finishing their discussion, the two of them started to talk about Kubinashi, which had been causing some commotion recently.

"... Teacher, do you think the rumours about Kubinashi are true?"

"Are you talking about the thief who lost his head? For the issue to be blown up to such an extent, it should be true."

The ponytailed man said calmly.

"Besides, we know better than anyone else that Youkai exist in this world."

Saying that, the ponytailed man laughed. That's right, Ribei laughed softly as well.

"But Teacher, if Kubinashi exists, he'll find us sooner or later, right? That guy was killed here, he must hate us to the core."

"Ho ho, because he was killed here, so he is avoiding this place out of fear, and can only kill other Youkai on the streets to vent his rage."

"Hahaha, well said!"

Just said the two of them were laughing, a commotion was heard outside.

The two of them were situated in a room facing the yard. Outside the door was a corridor, and beyond the corridor was a spacious garden.

Currently, the paper door was closed. However, just as the two of them heard a roar coming from some distance away, the paper door was suddenly broken, and a Youkai tumbled in. It was the Youkai usually in charge of guarding the yard. He was covered in blood, his body tangled in string, and as he rolled in, he hit the table filled with the dishes, and in the end, lay flat on the tatami.

“What’s all this ruckus!”

“Kubinashi... it’s Kubinashi...”

The Youkai, covered in fresh blood, pointed towards the yard.

“Kubinashi?”

Looking towards the yard, a man was slowly approaching. As expected, the head and body of the man named Kubinashi were not connected. Rabei had seen that face before, it belonged to the thief who was disposed of.

Kubinashi took his time to walk towards the two men. Then, the Youkai attacked Kubinashi from all directions. Kubinashi only lightly waved the string in his hands, and exterminated those Youkai in a flash. Some were strangled, some had their bodies broken, or suspended in the air. Corpses started to pile up around Kubinashi.

When he was about ten feet away, Kubinashi stopped advancing.

“Hagiya Rabei, it’s been a while.”

Kubinashi said from his end of the yard.

Rabei, with his breath still smelling of wine, glared at Kubinashi.

“Thief... looks like you haven’t learnt your lesson, and came to seek death again.”

“Hmph! Today, I didn’t come to steal money, or to snatch women, but to take your despicable life.”

“Bullshit! I see that you really wish for death, you sewer rat! ---Hey! Get him!”

Rabei shouted, his spit flying. Following that, Youkai came streaming out from various locations in the mansion.

---This day has finally arrived.

Kubinashi thought. Coming to Hagiya to kill the detestable Rabei, the time had finally come.

He had a reason for picking today, because it was the day he and his comrades died, the best day to settle his revenge.

Under Rabei’s orders, the Youkai rushed towards Kubinashi.

The Youkai under Hagiya’s care may be more fearsome than before, but it might be because he had seen the Hyakki of the Nura Clan, Kubinashi did not feel scared at all. These Youkai did not have any skill, and only knew how to lunge forward, Kubinashi could get rid of them even with his eyes closed.

However, in this group of Youkai, there were still some who possessed some skill. Faced with these Youkai, Kubinashi dealt with them calmly, getting rid of them one by one. Even though his string assassination techniques were close

to perfect, he cannot go easy on them now. His current goal is to kill off Ribe. Before achieving that goal, he cannot let down his guard.

As Kubinashi fought, he kept track of Ribe with his peripheral vision. If he let Ribe out of his sight, and allowed him to escape, then there was no meaning to his current mission. This is when his floating head proved the most useful, allowing him to track his prey easily.

Ribe currently had his back against a sunken in section of the wall, watching the skilled Kubinashi. He looked infuriated, his face saying, "These useless fellows! There's so many of them, but they can't even get rid of one thief!"

---Idiot, that's because I have grown stronger. Before I kill you, I refuse to die here!

Kubinashi unleashed his killing technique. Many strings shot out from both his hands, flying forward. The string, enveloped in fear did not distinguish its targets, and flew towards the Youkai rushing towards or running away from him, piercing or slicing through their body, taking away their lives in an instant.

---This was the technique "Cat's cradle: Slithering Blade"

After returning the strings into his hands, the limbs of the Youkai fell onto the ground like rain.

Just then, Kubinashi heard a scream.

He turned around, and saw that a woman was getting attacked by a Youkai near the door. Even though he could not see her appearance, but he felt a sense of unease.

---Don't tell me...Kino?

Just as Kubinashi was suspecting such a possibility, the ponytailed man's voice was heard from inside.

"Don't kill her! Bring her here."

The Youkai who received the order grabbed the woman and flew into the air. It was a Youkai with wings.

The Youkai flew over Kubinashi's head, and came to the corridor outside the room, then threw the woman down like she was a piece of trash.

That woman was Kino after all. Her wavy hair rolled down the kimono she wore as an Oiran.

The ponytailed man pulled out his sword immediately, pressing it against Kino's neck.

"Kino!"

Why did she have to come here? Kubinashi was filled with shock.

"Kubinashi, I'm sorry..."

Kino's voice was very weak.

"Hmph! This woman has something to do with you after all! Seeing her clothes, she must be an Oiran. This woman must love you a lot, running here without regards to her life, such a dedicated woman."

The ponytailed man continued to speak, with a victorious tone,

"But, she has brought harm to you this time. Actually coming over and becoming a hostage, to be direct, she's just a foolish woman."

Kubinashi shut his eyes tightly, silently berating Kino for doing such a foolish thing, but he was also pained by how dedicated she was.

The reason why Kino ran here was because Kubinashi had said that night that he would settle things with Hagiya, and would no longer kill Youkai. In addition, Kino knew that today was the death anniversary of “Thief-san”, so she would throw everything to the wind to see Kubinashi. It could be his fault that everything ended up like this, Kubinashi thought to himself.

“Even though this woman is stupid, but if she dies, you’ll feel guilty, right? Put down that string and surrender.”

The ponytailed man said. Then, he pointed the sword at Kino’s neck.

“...”

Seeing Kubinashi squeeze his string, Kino shouted,

“Kubinashi! Don’t do it! Don’t care about me, continue fighting, quickly! Don’t you want to settle things with Hagiya? This... this is the reason why you came here, isn’t it?”

“...”

Hagiya’s Youkai stopped attacking.

Suddenly, a low laugh was heard, it was Rabei’s voice. He walked up and stood beside the ponytailed man, saying to Kubinashi,

“Now then, Thief, what you do plan to do? Do you want to ignore her situation and kill me, or do you want to exchange your lowly life for hers?”

Kubinashi glared at Rabei and replied,

“... How can you guarantee that you would let Kino go once you have killed me?”

“Feh! A lowly thief actually suspects me? Are you testing me?”

Rabei said with a hmph, and continued,

“Thief, listen well. I am not a killing monster, I don’t kill innocents. As long as I kill you, I would spare her life. Last time, I only took Shiragiku away to lure you here, I had no intention of killing her at all. Shiragiku died because she took her own life.”

“Kubinashi! Don’t believe him! Fight! If it’s for you, I can die without regrets...”

Kino shouted in desperation.

“Kino...”

Kubinashi looked in her direction. Even though there was some distance between them, he could see her tear stained face.

Her voice was choked, but she was still smiling determinedly.

“I want to protect you, I definitely can’t let you die again. As long as you live on, I’m willing to sacrifice my life.”

“Kino...”

Kubinashi let out a small breath. He did not hesitate for long, reaching his decision quickly.

Kubinashi threw the string he had in his hands to the ground.

“Kubinashi!”

“...Kino, thank you.”

He smiled at Kino.

“For someone to think of me to this extent, I feel so fortunate.”

“Kubinashi...”

“Always having to be protected by you, I’m really apologetic about that. But this time it’s my turn to protect you... No! I wasn’t able to protect you at all, and you ended up in this situation because of me, so I can’t allow you to die here.”

“Hahaha!”

A despicable laughter was heard, cutting off Kino’s words. Ribeï’s ugly stomach wobbled due to his laughter.

“Both of you are throwing away your life, and trying so hard to protect each other, this is rich! But it’s getting late, and cold. It would be bad if I caught a cold, so let’s put an end to this tragic play.”

“Hagiya.”

Kubinashi faced Hagiya with a serious expression and said,

“I can give my life to you, but you have to guarantee that you will not harm her.”

“Kubinashi! Didn’t you hear what I said? Don’t do it!”

“Aren’t you tired of that! How many times do I have to repeat myself? Don’t you know that merchants have to avoid talking excessively as well?”

Ribeï completely ignored Kino’s protests, scolding Kubinashi. Then, he threw a look at the ponytailed man.

The ponytailed man nodded, then turned towards the Youkai who were keeping their distance, saying,

“It’s fine, get him!”

He had just finished speaking, and like time had continued moving again, the Youkai rushed towards Kubinashi. The next moment, Kubinashi felt countless blades entering every part of his body.

---I’m really stupid.

Kubinashi thought as he was being attacked. Once again, he had allowed an important woman to become a hostage, and once again, he was going to be killed by Youkai.

But, with my death, I would be able to save Kino’s life, that’s enough.

---I’m sorry, Kino. Goodbye.

Just as Kubinashi said his goodbyes to Kino amongst the immense pain he felt, a woman’s sharp and mournful cry rang through the air.

When Kubinashi was surrounded by Youkai, Kino couldn’t breathe.

She didn’t know why, but the scene in front of her seemed to have frozen in time.

The man she had always yearned for and thought about was getting killed by Youkai right in front of her eyes.

This will be the second time in which the man she loved is murdered. It was like this when Thief-san was killed, and it will be like this after he turned into the Youkai Kubinashi.

---No...

A strong resistance shot through her chest like lightning.

---I don't want to lose him again...

No... not like this...no...I don't want this...!

Kino's heart protested just like a stubborn child, pure and determined. A strong will filled her body, and expanded, like it was going to burst out.

---Kubinashi! Don't! Don't leave me behind! Don't leave my side anymore! Kubinashi! Kubinashi...!

"Kubinashi---!"

Another voice which did not belong to Kino, shot out from Kino's throat. At the same time, Kino's body went through a strange transformation. Her hair grew longer and longer at an abnormal rate.

---Your hair grows out immediately after it's cut, that's really fast.

---Kino, do you know? I heard that women with lots of hair...

---I heard the women with lots of hair...are promiscuous and full of emotion, and are always thinking of men, and in the end, *they will become a Youkai known as Kejoro...*

After Kino's scream, it was followed by Ribe's scream. The ponytailed man also let out a moan.

But Kubinashi was surrounded by Youkai, and could not see the situation they were in.

---What happened?

The screams quickly spread to the Youkai. Amongst the continuous moans, the Youkai who attacked Kubinashi gradually let go, and the Youkai surrounding him slowly thinned out.

From the gaps which appeared, Kubinashi saw the situation behind.

At that moment, he doubted his vision, the scene in front of him was hard to take in.

Kino's hair had turned very strange.

Her hair had grown to extraordinary lengths, and it was still growing, spreading out like a large amount of ink, and covering the whole yard.

In addition, the hair started to move like a living creature, tangling around Ribe's body. Following that was the ponytailed man, the Youkai, even the ones that are running away had their limbs tangled. Kino used her hair to seal off everyone's movements.

---Kino, why did your hair become like this? This appearance, it's as if...

"You...have turned into a Youkai as well...?"

She turned towards Kubinashi, her gaze sharp. However, even if Kino had turned into this, Kubinashi did not feel afraid, his heart felt no fear.

Sharp and absolute beauty. In Kubinashi's eyes, Kino was an extremely beautiful female Youkai whose beauty alone would send shivers down one's spine.

"Kubinashi, I'm fine now! There's no need to worry about me!"

Kino said as she controlled the large amount of hair.

"I will protect you from behind! Use your strings all you want!"

Kubinashi only paused for a moment before he nodded in reply. He stood up, picking up the string which he threw on the ground.

The pain he felt was forgotten. Kino is now next to me, fighting alongside me. This feeling gave Kubinashi an unlimited amount of energy.

Both Kubinashi's hands were coiled with string. He let out a breath, feeling the Youki filling up his body, blowing away his pains and hurts.

The scattered enemies were tangled in Kino's hair, the moans rising up and down in volume. The ponytailed man was also caught by Kino, floating in the air. He tried to free himself by waving his limbs and sword, but it was no use.

"Kino!"

Kubinashi turned his gaze towards Kino, signaling her to let go of the ponytailed man. Kino nodded, and loosened the hair around his body.

Having lost his balance after being freed from his restraints, the ponytailed man stumbled a few steps.

After he found his footing, the ponytailed man raised his head, and saw that Kubinashi was glaring at him.

Losing his Youkai army, the ponytailed man was only left with two options; run or draw his blade against Kubinashi.

Perhaps he realised that he had nowhere to run, he raised his sword.

The ponytailed man pointed the tip of his sword at Kubinashi, and covered in sweat, he said,

"Kubinashi, do you want to cooperate with me?"

"Cooperate with you?"

"That's right! Cooperate with me. With my intelligence and your fighting prowess, we would be able to get our hands on anything."

"Will you be able to connect my head to my body?"

Hearing this, the ponytailed man fell silent.

Then, Kubinashi said,

"You're a swordsman, come!"

The next second, the ponytailed man attacked. In the eyes of the thief, the ponytailed man's attack is fierce and powerful, enough to break out in cold sweat, but to the Youkai Kubinashi, it was like watch a stop motion film.

At the moment their two paths crossed, Kubinashi shot out his string, taking off the ponytailed man's head.

“Hagiya Ribeil!”

Kubinashi shouted. Hearing this, Kino immediately loosened the black hair around Ribeil’s body, throwing him down. The fat body fell of the ground with a thump.

The moment his gaze met Kubinashi’s, who still had his strings in his hands, Ribeil shook and it was as if his soul had fled his body from the fright.

In the spacious yard, the only people who weren’t trapped by the hair was Kino herself, Kubinashi and Ribeil, these three people.

Ribeil’s hairstyle was loosened and his clothes were messed up.

“No...don’t kill me...”

“When Seisuke and Kichijiro were killed, they did not even have the chance to beg for their lives, of course it was the same for me as well.”

“I beg you...please spare my life...”

“Hagiya, remember this well, the one who would send you to the afterlife is a Youkai--- ‘Kubinashi, Hitachi’s String Assassin’.”

Ribeil opened his mouth, like he wanted to say something. But Kubinashi did not want to see his face any longer.

With a quick movement, Kubinashi crossed his hands, shooting out string coated in Fear, cutting through Ribeil’s neck.

The head of the evil man flew through the air, and dropped to the ground with a ‘Pa’. Kubinashi retracted his strings, and at that moment, his arms sagged, as if he had no more strength to hold them up anymore.

After completing the revenge, Kubinashi and Kino left Hagiya.

Seeing Kubinashi get rid of Ribeil, Kino immediately let the Youkai go. These Youkai did not react the same way, some ran away, while some attacked, trying to fight back. For the Youkai who ran away, Kubinashi let them go, and for those Youkai who fought back, he got rid of them one by one with his strings, the process was efficient and he did not use up unnecessary energy.

Kubinashi and Kino walked through the gate, and stopped simultaneously. They looked at each other, and smiled.

“You still saved me in the end, thank you, Kino.”

“Let’s not talk about that. Instead, what do you plan to do now?”

“As for that...”

Kubinashi paused.

After his revenge, Shiragiku, Seisuke, Kichijiro, and Hagiya, who was just killed, no longer exist in this world. After turning into a Youkai, and achieving his goal, where should he go from here? The time to decide his future had finally arrived.

At that moment, that man’s figure surfaced in Kubinashi’s mind.

That man, would be the Second Commander of the Nura Clan, whom he met on the bridge.

---You would only become stronger when you have comrades.

This sentence circled in Kubinashi’s heart.

At that time, Kubinashi had said that comrades would only drag him down, but he was lying that time. Now that his wish had been fulfilled, his hatred faded, he naturally accepted the Commander's words.

Comrades, can make you stronger.

Even the Second Commander was very strong, and that Kubinashi can be considered quite skilled for managing to stay alive after such a fierce battle, but once Kino is at his side, he could feel that the "Fear" released from his body is many times stronger compared to when he is fighting on his own.

He wanted to see the person who made him realise this once more. As a Youkai, the place he belonged might be under him, under the flag of the Nura Clan.

"I'm going to find the Nura Clan."

Kubinashi replied.

"He said his name is Nura Rihan. I want to see him. Kino, you..."

Kubinashi wanted to ask her if she wanted to return to Yoshiwara, but he swallowed his words.

Right now, Kino is no longer a human. That wriggling hair, shouldn't be something a human should have. Perhaps Kino always had Youkai blood running through her veins, and awakened as a Youkai due to the battle, or she was a human who had suddenly turned into a Youkai. But, no matter what the truth was, the woman in front of Kubinashi had become a Youkai.

"I'm already a Youkai, I can't go back to Yoshiwara..."

Kino said softly. But she quickly added cheerfully,

"Since it's like this, I can only go with you. I have already bid goodbye to my human body, the parade of a Hundred Demons should be more suited for me than an Oiran parade."

"Good idea, they'll definitely be delighted."

Kubinashi's expression softened.

"Delighted? Why?"

"A beauty is going to join the Nura Clan, of course they'll be delighted."

Kubinashi naturally cracked a joke.

Hearing this, Kino was stunned for a while, then suddenly turned shy, scolded an "Idiot" and raised her fist like she was going to hit someone. Seeing this, Kubinashi couldn't help but laugh loudly. Ever since he became a Youkai, this is the first time he laughed from the bottom of his heart.

Kubinashi stepped forward, Kino followed as well.

The moonlight from the half moon, lit up the two figures.

~End~

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Shiibashi Hiroshi.

Nurarihyon no Mago's novel series has reached its third volume. That's really fast!

Ohsaki-sensei, thank you for your hard work.

There is always a short afterword at the end of every text. But this time, the afterword is supposed to span across pages, and it's really shocking, what should I write about?

Let's talk about that first. About the stories involving my favourite Kitsune-sama, as well as the Supreme Commander falling under suspicion of having an illegitimate child.

Then how about Kubinashi? Let's leave that for later.

These two stories are original stories written by Ohsaki-sensei after referring to the manga, so I didn't contribute any ideas at all, and just took it wholesale, it was really relaxing...no, I should say it was the smart thing to do. In the end, I enjoyed these stories thoroughly as a reader.

That day, I met a beautiful lady—

Oh no! It's seriously bad, the first sentence had me completely captivated, and totally suited my tastes. At the beginning, I already thought that the substance of the story is very close to mine, and it's really dark as well. After I read everything, the feeling that it suits my style increased. To tell the truth, this story is No. 1!

When Hagoromo Gitsune releases a strong Fear, the feeling that the character gives off should be like this! After reading this story, I felt this strongly.

I'm embarrassed, really.

Let's talk about the man who went out and resulted in a human life...no, the story about the Supreme Commander. It's really the third volume, and this is the third continuation story from the past arc. In the end, the eternal Youhime keeps making an appearance (laugh). I'm really happy.

About the illustration picture where the Supreme Commander pulled out his blade to fight, in the period dramas I watched when I was in Middle School, the Samurai inside always wore a cone hat, and I also really admired the works of Kojima Goseki-sensei, so I decided to make the Samurai wear the cone hats. I hope to challenge myself and draw an authentic period era manga.

Now then, next would be another story---Kubinashi's and Kejoro's past...this was written based on my idea, even though the manga had already revealed some parts...around the time they fought against Ibaraki Douji, I really want to draw something about that, so I had that idea some time ago.

But because of some reasons, this matter did not have a continuation.

As for the reason...it was just really dark (troubled smile). And I did not have enough pages, so it could not be published in JUMP magazine.

Actually, I couldn't hold it back and in the Omake (the one that came with volume 12), I drew the beginning of the story about the two of them. Perhaps you readers have already seen it.

This time, Ohsaki-sensei revealed his desire of wanting to write Kubinashi's story, so I provided my prototype idea. I hope to present this story to everyone, and the time isn't that far from the Kyoto arc, so the plot can still be connected.

My prototype idea was really messy, having to use that as a base to write a story is really difficult.

Even then, the story was still written, it's awesome! Ohsaki-sensei, I'm really thankful to you.

So this novel is different from the first two, because this time, I can also be considered the "author".

Did everyone enjoy the novel? If you have any thoughts, please tell me.

Currently, the manga is also using short stories to go into a new arc. Showing new characters and an exciting world view is now my most important goal.

Now, I hope that I will be able to meet everyone again through JUMP or the novel.

Hiroshi Shiibashi

Hello everyone, this is Ohsaki.

The third volume of "Nurarihyon no Mago" has been released!

This work is also made up of short stories, so even if you started reading from this volume, it will not pose that bring of a problem.

About the stories this time...

The first chapter is a scary story about Hagoromo Gitsune, its contents are dark, to the point that people might think it's a little overboard, however, after getting the consent from Shiibashi-sensei, I just continued with the dark plot with all my might. Yeah...Hagoromo Gitsune is really beautiful.

The second chapter is something that has become routine, the Supreme Commander and Youhime. The guys from the Nura Clan mansion are as lively and noisy as ever.

I always had the feeling that if there was no Supreme Commander or Youhime, it would not be called the novel of "Nurarihyon no Mago". So being able to write about them again makes me really happy! As well as the feeling of security that comes with writing it! As an author, I was really able to write freely and feel satisfied! (laugh)...uh, in short, it was that sort of feeling.

Next is the third chapter, the story of Kubinashi and Kejoro.

The story can be considered to be the main theme this time. The story mentions the special street “Yoshiwara”, so some readers might shun it to some extent. But, I would like for everyone to read it. Tragic love and a dim hope, the process which brought Kubinashi and Kejoro together, it’s really worth a read.

Besides the large amount of help I have got from Hiroshi-sensei, my editor gave me many suggestions as well. Especially the draft which Hiroshi-sensei gave for the third story, which gave it a lot more substance, I am thankful for everyone’s help. Lastly is all the readers, I would like to give you my greatest thanks.

Thank you and I hope we met again.

Ohsaki Tomohiro